

**SCOTTISH ECCENTRICS:
THE TRADITION OF OTHERNESS IN SCOTTISH POETRY
FROM HOGG TO MACDIARMID**

by

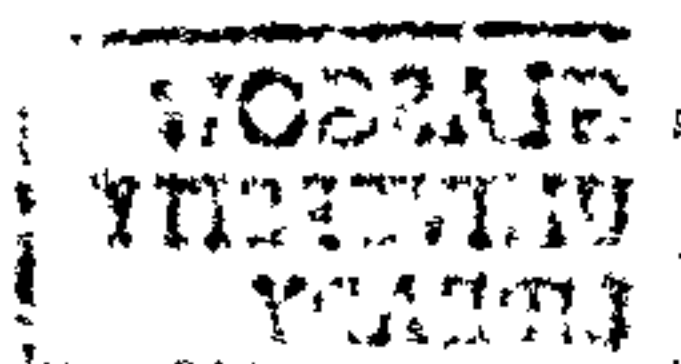
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VOLUME II

Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD

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Faculty of Arts, University of Glasgow, October 1997



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CHAPTER 5

JOHN DAVIDSON: DRAMATIC ECCENTRICITY AND OTHERNESS

BROADBENT. [...] I find the world quite good enough
for me: rather a jolly place, in fact.

KEEGAN [*looking at him with quiet wonder*]

You are satisfied?

BROADBENT. As a reasonable man, yes. I see no evils
in the world -- except, of course, natural evils -- that
cannot be remedied by freedom, self-government
and English institutions [...].

KEEGAN. You feel at home in the world, then?

BROADBENT. Of course. Don't you?

KEEGAN [*from the very depths of his nature*] No.¹

PART I

The outcast

'No one is to write my life now or at any time, but let all men study
and discuss in private and in public my poems and plays, especially
my Testaments and Tragedies.'²

Unlike James Young Geddes, John Davidson received critical acknowledgement both
from his contemporaries and subsequent writers, and various critical and biographical

¹ Bernard Shaw, *John Bull's Other Island*, ed. by Dan H. Laurence (London: Penguin Books, 1984), IV, p. 141.

² See R. D. MacLeod, *John Davidson. A Study in Personality* (Glasgow: W & R Holmes Ltd., 1957), p. 3.

studies of his work and personality have already appeared.³ Similarly to James Thomson, he was one of the Scots who, in the later nineteenth century, crossed the Scottish border to try his fortune as a literary man in the centralised cultural environment of metropolitan London. He moved to the capital in 1889, and there he started to frequent some of the most fashionable literary circles of the day, and to publish his articles in the most *à la mode* and prestigious journals. Consequently, the present section might appear inappropriately entitled. Nonetheless, Davidson did live as an outcast and remained, like James Thomson, another Ishmael figure of Scottish literature throughout his life. As Tom Hubbard has pointed out, 'Davidson despised equally the dour philistinism of Scotland and the fashionable languor of London',⁴ and my present concern is to explain why he always remained an outsider within the contemporary cultural and social establishment.

Keegan, in Shaw's *John Bull's Other Island*, personifies the same feelings which haunted and disrupted Davidson's psyche: the sense of being out of place in the surrounding world, a perpetual outsider everywhere, cursed and obsessed with his rootlessness and non-belonging. From the beginning of his career, Davidson expressed his post-romantic and pre-existentialist exile from the world in terms shifting between loud self-assertiveness and quiet submissiveness, and his tragic end may be explained by his life-long inability to resolve these violent tensions, or to find a way of enduring existence in a world which he felt alien and alienating. Most critics seem to agree that on March 23rd 1909 Davidson left his house in Penzance, Cornwall, with suicidal intentions.⁵ In the last years of his life, the divergence between his aspirations and failed reality became intolerable for him, and when he realised that he no longer had a mission to accomplish, he saw suicide as the only possible way out. Defeat or victory? The question is doubtless more complex than it may seem. Davidson was neither a pusillanimous nor an irresponsible person. Nevertheless, neither his

³ *Inter alia*: Mary O'Connor, *John Davidson* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1987); John Sloan, *John Davidson: First of the Moderns* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Benjamin Townsend, *John Davidson. Poet of Armageddon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961).

⁴ Tom Hubbard, 'Irony and Enthusiasm: the Fiction of John Davidson', *Scottish Literary Journal*, 11 (1984), 71-82 (p. 75).

⁵ Both the contemporary papers and Davidson's critics confirm this hypothesis.

unremitting struggle against the disgrace of financial difficulties nor his love for his wife and sons were strong enough reasons to divert him from such a desperate act.

Davidson took that leap into darkness, like Smith, the eponymous protagonist of Davidson's Spasmodic play who, like his creator, is the victim of a Hamlet-like tension between the contemplative and active life, and of the dualism of mind and body with which Davidson had to deal throughout his life. In his essay on Davidson's novels, Tom Hubbard offers a fascinating explanation of the reasons which might have led to his final breakdown. Hubbard characterises Davidson's consciousness as divided into two opposite tendencies which emerge in his works: on the one hand passive scepticism, also identified with irony, and on the other, active idealism, or enthusiasm. As long as these two forces formed what Hubbard calls a '*discordia concors*'⁶ within the poet's consciousness, a coexistence of contrasting bents which do not provoke any psychological laceration, he could exploit the creative force deriving from them. Unfortunately Davidson, contrary to Hogg and, in a different sense, MacDiarmid, was not able to achieve this, and the result was tragic. In other words, as Hubbard puts it:

The most tragic aspect of his life and work [...] was the split in his own sensibility. In most of his fiction, the ironic and the enthusiastic, the Hamlet and the Quixote, coexisted in a creative *discordia concors*. As with Stevenson's Jekyll and Hyde, however, when the one atrophied the other, the survival of either was no longer assured. (p. 79)

Critics are still wondering whether Davidson took his life in a moment of temporary delirium or as a deliberate act. Suicide is a recurrent theme in Davidson's works,⁷ and it is also an inherent part of his all-embracing philosophical outlook.

⁶ Hubbard, p. 79. Hamlet and Don Quixote are here used as antonomasia of two opposite types of human nature, the ironist and the enthusiast respectively, a distinction which Hubbard drew from Lena Milman's translation of a lecture by Turgenev which appeared in *The Fortnightly Review*, 332 (1894), 191-205.

⁷ The theme crops up in *Smith*, in the *Testaments* and *Tragedies*, and in the eclogue 'Lammas'.

Thus, to decide whether to consider it as his ultimate act against the Christian God he had rejected or as an extreme manifestation of strong will and protest against the world, it is necessary to turn to his literary and philosophical output.

Since Davidson's art is one in which poetry and philosophy are inseparable, his ideas will be tackled in depth in Section II, which focuses on his most representative poems. Suffice it to say in this context that one of the axiomatic principles on which his philosophy is founded is the notion of irony. Irony invests everything, according to Davidson:

It is centric, the adamantine axis of the universe. At its poles are the illusions we call matter and spirit, day and night, pleasure and pain, beauty and ugliness [...] Irony is the enigma within the enigma, the open secret, the only answer vouchsafed the eternal riddle [...] ⁸

Irony is evident in both the subject-matter and the style of his works. Hence their wide and heterogeneous range of themes and characters, and the shifting poetic tone. Davidson's ironic vision allows him to deal with reciprocally contradictory themes such as his sympathy for the social underdog and his belief in the strong man, the *outré* egocentric and individualist, or the depiction of the countryside in some poems and the representation of urban life in others. In addition to such a thematic variety, his poetry presents continuous stylistic fluctuations. Most of his works are characterised by a juxtaposition of lyrical and prosaic aspects, of tragic and comic tones, in a way which resembles the multifariousness of Carlyle's writing.

In one of his poems, called 'The Outcast', Davidson addresses his own soul through the voice of the most self-assertive and stoic of his personae, and in the concluding lines he launches his paradoxical reaction:

Though on all hands
The powers unsheathe

⁸ John Davidson, 'Letters to the Editor. Irony', *Speaker*, 22 April 1899, p. 455.

Their lightning-brands

And from beneath,

And from above

One curse be hurled

With scorn, with love

Affront the world.⁹

His disappearance from the world was his ultimate and extreme ironical act: to affront the world by an act of self-denial and revolt. Perhaps not the entire world but certainly many were shaken by the tragic news. Hugh MacDiarmid was among them. He said that he 'felt as if the bottom had fallen out of [his] world',¹⁰ and he recorded his feelings provoked by Davidson's disappearance in a short poem called 'Of John Davidson':

I remember one death in my boyhood
That, next to my father's, and darker, endures;
Not Queen Victoria's but, Davidson, yours,
And something in me has always stood
Since then looking down the sandslope
On your small black shape by the edge of the sea
A bullet-hole through a great scene's beauty,
God through the wrong end of a telescope.¹¹

There is no sign of contempt in these words, not even between the lines, for Davidson's inability to 'dree his weird';¹² instead, there is a sympathetic feeling

⁹ 'The Outcast', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, ed. by Andrew Turnbull, 2 vols. (Edinburgh & London: Scottish Academic Press, 1973), I, pp. 147-148 (l. 33). All quotations from Davidson's poems refer to this edition, and will be indicated after the first reference within the text by the number of the first line quoted.

¹⁰ Hugh MacDiarmid, 'John Davidson. Influence and Influences', p. 47.

¹¹ 'Of John Davidson', in *Hugh MacDiarmid. Complete Poems*, I, p. 362.

contained in that description of the 'small black shape'. 'God through the wrong end of a telescope' encapsulates the unorthodox, subversive value of Davidson's religious thought; in this line MacDiarmid demonstrates that a kind of spiritual awe and an overwhelming sense of sublimity can inhabit even the most irreligious act.

MacDiarmid was one of the most enthusiastic critics of John Davidson, and one of the later Scottish poets to recognise his indebtedness to him. He maintained that Davidson's *Bruce* was the best Scottish historical play.¹³ He recognised aspects in Davidson which foreshadowed his own poetic and moral views. They shared, for example, the Carlylean notion of the prophet-poet playing a leading role in the world, and similarly conceived the individual as a microcosm encompassing the universal. Their Muse was encyclopaedic, embracing poetry and science, and electing as subject-matter themes conventionally seen as non-poetic. Moreover, both of them deplored the Burns cult and the spurious Scots of Burnsian imitators.

The notions of 'otherness' and 'eccentricity' are crucial in the identification of cultural and philosophical links between the two Scottish poets. MacDiarmid considered the eccentric or uncanny as an essential mark of the Scottish psyche, hence rejecting Edwin Muir's theory of 'dissociation of sensibility' which the Orkney poet saw as the main cause of the poetic void in Scottish literature from Burns onwards, including also Davidson and Thomson.¹⁴ 'Davidson is the only Scottish poet to whom I owe anything at all',¹⁵ said MacDiarmid during a typically self-assertive interview, and he gave different reasons which can be gathered under the word 'eccentricity', which MacDiarmid presented as a feature of famous Scots in his *Scottish Eccentrics*. Even though Davidson does not appear in the gallery of his eccentric Scottish characters, MacDiarmid recognises in his personality and work the essential idiosyncrasies which he attributes to the 'uncanny' Scot, and to 'Scottishness' in general. In other words, he very strongly maintains that Davidson, like Byron before

¹² The same expression, meaning 'endure his fate', is used by Thomson in *The City of Dreadful Night*, V. 25.

¹³ See Hugh MacDiarmid, *Contemporary Scottish Studies*, ed. by Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 1995), pp. 259-261.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

him, is a Scottish and not an English writer, because his work displays themes and forms attuned to the Scottish poetic tradition, and he concludes that

The pity was that [...] he was never put at school in possession of more than a few discrete fragments of his proper national heritage, and, above all, that he was unable to realise the far greater suitability of Scots for the expression of his ideas than English could ever afford.

However correct some of these statements might be, it should not be forgotten that they were part of the cultural-political agenda of the Scottish Renaissance. Such a partisan position leads to controversial assertions, such as:

Social protest, espousal of the cause of the underdog, anti-religion, materialism, Rabelaisian wit, invective -- all these find a place much more easily and prominently in the Scottish than in the English tradition.¹⁶

MacDiarmid is here only partly right. He seems to ignore or neglect the fact that unconventional, subversive elements recurred also in English and Irish literature at the turn of the century and earlier.

MacDiarmid's essay on Davidson is remarkable especially for hinting, perhaps inadvertently, at another aspect: it is not Davidson's non-Englishness that defines his literary output, but rather his being different from, 'other' than, most of the Scottish writers of his time because of the peculiarity of his style and ideas. In addition, it is important to point out that it was Davidson himself who chose to foster his otherness by leaving his native land. Thus MacDiarmid's claim that Davidson was a Scottish writer without fully realising it, particularly on the linguistic side, should be reworded in these terms: Davidson was perfectly aware of his Scottish heritage but, at a crucial

¹⁵ 'John Davidson. Influence and Influences', p. 47.

¹⁶ 'John Davidson. Influence and Influences', p. 51.

stage of his life, he preferred to leave it behind, since it had become a synonym for provincialism, and a burden curbing his ambition to embark on a literary career. Hence his exile to London in 1889, in step with other nineteenth-century Scottish writers who took the same decision before him, such as Carlyle and James Thomson. Unfortunately, Davidson's hope to dispense with the stifling sense of isolation and remoteness that he felt in Scotland was not to be fulfilled. Davidson is the typical example of the artist who strives in vain to evade the burden of family and national restraints, to escape dominant traditions in order to achieve a new freedom. In the novel *Earl Lavender* (1895), one of the characters says:

'Every Scotchman has a Highland dress and a set of bagpipes [...] Very few of them will admit it, [...] they even try to conceal it from each other; but in some cupboard or corner every Scot keeps a kilt, a dirk and a chanter [...]'¹⁷

However hackneyed these images may seem, the symbolism is obvious: the Scots' obsession with past, history and tradition is an indelible part of their individual subconscious as well as Jung's 'collective unconscious' -- the ingrained and hereditary racial memory which surfaces in the archetypes and universal symbols of dreams and literature. Looked at from a distance, London seemed to promise a liberation from this burden, but, once there, Davidson's obstinate hunt for success was continuously encumbered by inner tensions and divisions, partly deriving from the new life he found in the alien world of London, and partly already existing within himself even before departing from Scotland. Like some of his contemporaries, yet perhaps in a hyperbolic way, Davidson was susceptible to the cultural and spiritual conflicts of the time, such as the dilemmas of faith and doubt, scientific progress and religious truth, economic wealth and the disgrace of poverty caused by industrialisation.

Thus, without fully realising it, MacDiarmid labelled Davidson as outcast and misfit within both the English and the Scottish tradition. In particular, he set Davidson

¹⁷ John Davidson, *A Full and True Account of the Wonderful Mission of Earl Lavender* (London: Ward and Downey Limited, 1895), pp. 225-226.

against a Scottish literary background characterised by 'pseudo-pastoral rubbish about an Arcadian life which had no relation to the facts at all',¹⁸ and identified two main strains in his poetry which look forward to Modernist writers: first, the use of a colloquial language reflecting the rhythm and cadence of ordinary speech; secondly, the treatment of urban themes. Davidson handles both these aspects in a somewhat 'uncanny' and 'eccentric' way. In other words, his writing is so multifarious and eclectic that it cannot be easily pinned down to a specific style and genre. The best description of his work is that it is interdisciplinary. In this respect, he is a 'proto-Modernist', as Douglas Dunn has suggested, and indeed his pioneering achievement was acknowledged by various Modernist writers.¹⁹

T. S. Eliot acknowledged his debt to Davidson, and in particular he praised Davidson's 'Thirty Bob A Week' as one of the best examples of his poetry of the underdog. Very acutely, Robert Crawford points out that Eliot's Prufrock is beholden to the schizophrenic protagonist of Davidson's dramatic monologue.²⁰ Although 'dingy urban images'²¹ is the aspect which unquestionably represents the main bridge between their works, there are also other linking elements between the two poets. In the Preface to *John Davidson. A Selection of His Poems*, edited by Maurice Lindsay, Eliot pays a similar tribute to another Scottish author who presents remarkable affinities with Davidson. This author is James Thomson, and Eliot refers to his masterpiece, *The City of Dreadful Night*, as the second Scottish poem which had the greatest influence on his own writing.

It is a fascinating coincidence that Davidson felt a similar admiration for Thomson's *chef d'oeuvre*. This is apparent in various articles which were published in *The Speaker* in 1899. In one of these essays, Davidson links Thomson's poetry with his theory of 'Pre-Shakespeareanism', whereby he speculates about developing a movement in poetry which would aim at removing what he calls 'the prismatic cloud

¹⁸ 'John Davidson. Influence and Influences', p. 51

¹⁹ Douglas Dunn, 'Language and Liberty', in *The Faber Book of Twentieth-Century Scottish Poetry*, ed. by Douglas Dunn (London; Boston: Faber & Faber, 1992), pp. xvii-xlvi (p. xvii).

²⁰ Robert Crawford, *The Savage and the City in the Works of T. S. Eliot* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 59.

²¹ T. S. Eliot, 'Preface' to *John Davidson. A Selection of His Poems*, ed. by Maurice Lindsay, unnumbered pages.

that Shakespeare hung out between poets and the world',²² so that poetry can be democratised and centre on contemporary, preferably urban, subjects. He credits to Thomson the first crucial move towards this goal, which, in sum, consists of turning what he calls 'the offal of the world'²³ into a suitable subject for poetry, thus objecting to the general opinion that only the statistician or the prose writer can deal with it. Thomson and his outstanding poem are the subject matter also of a later article which appeared in June the same year. The form of this essay reflects Davidson's interest in theatre, and, in particular, his fondness for dialogue techniques, which he applied either to conventional conversation pieces or to the interior monologues of his inwardly cracked characters. The reading of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama which Davidson manically devoured in his youth left indelible traces in his *forma mentis*. Therefore he must have welcomed with favour the contemporary vogue of the dramatic monologue initiated by Browning and later adopted by Hardy, Kipling, Eliot and Yeats. The article in question is part of a sequence of 'tête-à-tête' discussions mostly on literary subjects between two eminent personages, but essentially they serve as a pretext for talking about recently published works by exploiting the possibilities of dialogic discourse and flyting. Very often, one of the speakers is Davidson's poetic persona, and he reviews the new books in this rôle.

For example, Bertram Dobell's selection of James Thomson's poems had recently appeared, and, in order to review it, Davidson imagines a conversation between Thomas Carlyle and his literary executor James Anthony Froude. Due to Davidson's life-long admiration for the Victorian Sage, it comes as no surprise that, in this case, it is Carlyle himself who acts as mouthpiece for Davidson's ideas. In particular, Carlyle says about Thomson:

Thomson's poems will always command attention because they sprang directly out of his life. I think that he was by Nature endowed beyond any of the English poets of his time [...] She gave

²² John Davidson, 'Pre-Shakespeareanism', *Speaker*, 28 January 1899, pp. 107-108 (p. 107).

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

Thomson [...] passion and intellect second only to Shakespeare
[...]²⁴

He goes on to explain why he considers Thomson one of the pre-Shakespearean writers. In short, he underlines the poet's concern for the plight of modern man, and his intention to unveil the truth behind the Shakespearean 'prismatic cloud'. In *Sentences and Paragraphs* (1893), a repository for Davidson's thoughts, he wrote:

The trees and flowers are as real as the soil from which they spring, and the so-called illusions with which the soul clothes itself are also a part of reality. To see the soul stripped of these, and held out like a heart plucked throbbing from a living breast, is perhaps in our time a necessary lesson [...]²⁵

There is here an indirect reminder of Thomson's primary intention in *The City* to 'show the bitter old and wrinkled truth/ Stripped naked of all vesture that beguiles'.²⁶ Furthermore, Davidson exchanged a correspondence with Bertram Dobell who procured him copies of Thomson's works.²⁷

In conclusion, Eliot and Davidson were the first eminent critics to acknowledge Thomson's merits. Yet a more important reason links them all together: each of them was an outsider in the tradition of English literature. In his study *Edwardian Poetry*, Kenneth Millard points out that 'an important characteristic of the Edwardian poets is their relation to a sense of England',²⁸ and he compares Davidson's

²⁴ John Davidson, 'Tête-à-Tête. Froude. Carlyle', *Speaker*, 17 June 1899, pp. 689-690 (p. 689).

²⁵ *Sentences and Paragraphs* (London: Lawrence and Bullen, 1893), p. 16.

²⁶ James Thomson, *The City of Dreadful Night*, Proem. 9. Other contemporary critics have pointed out the similarities between the two writers. Maurice Lindsay, for instance, saw a strong resemblance between their pessimistic outlook and also between the circumstances of their religious upbringing and domestic life. He points out that 'in their revelations of, or revealing in, despair, Thomson and Davidson look forward to the twentieth century'. See his *History of Scottish Literature* (London: Robert Hale, 1977), p. 305.

²⁷ See 'Letter to Bertram Dobell. 25 November 1890', in *Selected Poems and Prose of John Davidson*, ed. by John Sloan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 171.

²⁸ Kenneth Millard, 'John Davidson: Scottish Versus English', in *Edwardian Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 131-154 (p. 131).

position in London with that of other exiles such as Conrad and Eliot. Disregarding what Davidson himself believed, and looking at his situation from a modern perspective, Millard sees Davidson's Scottishness as the essential 'foreign element' (p. 131) which enabled him, as well as other writers after him, to develop an ironic distance from contemporary England and, consequently, to acquire a wider, anti-parochial vision of life. In other words, cultural estrangement and displacement are presented by Millard as positive experiences, since they bestowed on the poet the objectivity and *Verfremdung* which are necessary to artistic creation. Davidson suffered from his self-tormenting aloofness from contemporary society, but with sensitive hindsight the critic sees it as a complex situation which essentially contributed to the expression of his genius.

Ironically, it was an Irishman, thus 'other' himself, who noticed Davidson's 'otherness' from his London associates, and attributed it to his Scottishness. The man was W. B. Yeats, who refers to Davidson in his *Autobiographies* as one of the members of the Rhymers' Club -- a literary association which met for several years in an old eating-house in Fleet Street called the Cheshire Cheese. Among the regular attendants were Lionel Johnson, Ernest Dowson, and Richard Le Gallienne. Occasionally, Oscar Wilde would take part in the meetings too, thus adding an extra dose of dandyism to a club which had *per se* a reputation for being eccentric and anti-conformist. Davidson could never go along with the slightly effeminate bent of the aesthetes and the more extravagant attitudes of the bohemian members of the club, which at times resulted in his patronising attitude towards their whimsicality. Yeats resented what in *Autobiographies* he called 'Davidson's Scottish roughness and exasperation', and was especially offended by him on the particular occasion when Davidson insisted on introducing four Scots into the Club claiming that they would provide it with what it lacked, that is, 'blood and guts'.²⁹ Yeats was so irritated by Davidson acting out the proverbial saying '*fier comme un ecossais*' that he retaliated by leaving to posterity the following hard-hearted portrait of the Scottish Rhymer:

²⁹ W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1956), pp. 168, 317-318.

With enough passion to make a great poet, though meeting no man of culture in early life, he lacked intellectual receptivity, and, anarchic and indefinite, lacked pose and gesture, and now no verse of his clings to my memory. (p. 318)

It may be that Yeats's acrimony towards Davidson was the result of the personal offence he took when he suspected the Scot to be the author of the pungent review of his play *The Countess Kathleen*, which appeared in the *Daily Chronicle* in 1892. Richard Le Gallienne, an outstanding intellectual of *fin de siècle* London literary circles, was similarly struck by Davidson's bull-headed and proud character, and described his personality as 'rocky and stubborn and full of Scotch fight, with no little of Scotch pig-headedness'. Nonetheless, he mitigated his judgement by adding that Davidson's apparent harshness was in fact a form of self-defence, a sort of invisible armour which he put on to mask his self-consciousness. In fact, behind that shield he concealed 'human kindness and repressed tenderness'.³⁰

Virginia Woolf was much more favourably disposed to Davidson's genius, though acknowledging that at times it is marred by a disturbing attempt to introduce his readers to his ideas by resorting ironically to the language and style of the Protestant preaching that he deeply abhorred in his youth. Other critics shared Woolf's view. Davidson expressly responded to their accusation that he was trying to indoctrinate his readers in a letter to William Archer:

I am not preaching any gospel: who reads my Parable will see that I am trying to state The Nature of Things, beginning without any theory or system, but with my own experience and an acquaintance with such facts as I have -- both bases increasing as I go on.³¹

³⁰ Richard Le Gallienne, *The Romantic 90s* (London: Putnam, 1951), p. 116, quoted in Andrew R. Turnbull, 'Introduction' to *The Poems of John Davidson*, I, pp. xiii-xxiv (p. xv).

³¹ Letter to William Archer, in Benjamin Townsend, *John Davidson. Poet of Armageddon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), p. 353.

Woolf described his genius as 'energetic, passionate, sincere, and master of his own method of expression',³² and she praised in particular the prosaic style and colloquial language of some of his poems which look forward to later poetic developments and stylistic revolutions. Her favourable opinion was echoed by other members of the contemporary intelligentsia such as Swinburne, Edmund Gosse, and Prof. John Nichol of Glasgow University, who had played an important part in introducing Davidson to radical and unorthodox circles in London. There are some doubts about the exact date of Davidson's arrival in London, but recent studies suggest that he visited the city for the first time in August 1889, and that, after three months, he went back to Scotland, even if only for a short time.³³ Eventually, he returned to London and settled in the capital from the beginning of 1890.

Before dealing more specifically with Davidson's life and achievement in London, some words need to be said on his early years in Scotland, since there are aspects of his education and family setting which left an indelible mark on his life and personality.³⁴ Rather than representing a sentimental attachment to Scotland, this ineradicable link with his forbears and his past was felt by the poet as a haunting curse. He struggled throughout his life to uncage his soul from what he saw as the prison of family and national institutions. This idea of freedom is indeed one of the pivotal themes of his works, but it was a battle lost from the beginning. As Townsend has pointed out, 'determined to be original, to acknowledge no ties with the past, he nevertheless remained unmistakably Scottish until the end of his life'.³⁵ Scottishness as hereditary scourge: this was the inescapable burden which afflicted him, especially in his exile years in London, where it became the main source of his estrangement and tragic isolation. What remained 'unmistakably Scottish' in Davidson?

His father, Alexander Davidson, was an Ayrshire minister of the Evangelical Union of Scotland, one of the strictest of the dissenting sects which separated in 1857

³² Virginia Woolf, 'Review of Hayim Fineman's *John Davidson. A Study of the Relation of His Ideas to His Poetry*', *TLS*, 16 August 1917, p. 390.

³³ John Sloan, 'John Davidson's Arrival in London: Some New Evidence', *Notes and Queries*, 3. 3 (1991), 331-333.

³⁴ For this chapter section I am indebted to three, previously mentioned, works on Davidson: Mary O'Connor, *John Davidson*; John Sloan, *John Davidson: First of the Moderns*; Benjamin Townsend, *John Davidson. Poet of Armageddon*.

from the United Secession Church, and one which adopted the theory of universal atonement³⁶ to replace the idea that salvation depended on divine grace. 1857 is the same year when John Davidson was born.³⁷ At the time of his birth, the family was in Barrhead, Renfrewshire, but in 1859 they moved to Glasgow, and finally to Greenock, where his father's preaching produced a strong impression on the local community, which was utterly cowed by his sermons. He was extremely single-minded and stern, and not surprisingly he was one of the supporters of the contemporary temperance movement. Alexander Davidson certainly had a charismatic impact even on his son, who, despite his rebellious character, had to join his father's church at the age of fifteen and listen to the proselytising of the Protestant ministers. Like Geddes and Thomson, Davidson absorbed the dialectic of the Protestant sermons but only to re-interpret and adapt it to his own poetic themes and forms. In fact his ultimate intention was to subvert it.

Davidson's strict religious upbringing was to remain a life-long influence on Davidson, and a distinct mark of Scottishness. Davidson left a portrait of his father in an article in *Candid Friend* in 1901:

My father was an admirable preacher and public speaker [...] he had great physical strength, a sanguine temperament, a most tender heart, and a mind of large capacity [...] he was the only Christian I ever knew. I think of him as the last of the Christians.³⁸

'Christian' stands here for an extremely orthodox individual. Davidson's mother, Helen Crockett, the daughter of an Elgin schoolteacher, was genuinely religious and more open-minded than her husband, but she was utterly subdued to his authority and always obliged to stifle her own more liberal opinions. Davidson's relationship with

³⁵ Townsend, p. 30.

³⁶ This is the theory according to which salvation is granted to everybody regardless of their class and religion.

³⁷ Three daughters were born before him. One of them died in her infancy, and another when John was only three. Then came other two children: 'Lizzie' and Thomas.

³⁸ Quoted in Andrew Turnbull, 'A Critical Edition of the Poems of John Davidson' (doctoral thesis, University of Aberdeen, 1973), p. 4.

his mother was less conflicting, and her death in 1896 was for him a cause of great distress. Father-son and mother-son relationships recur as subject-matter of many of his poems. This reflects both his personal experience and the late nineteenth-century preoccupation with generation conflicts which recurs in many Scottish novels by Stevenson, George MacDonald, Margaret Oliphant, Douglas Brown, as well as in the wider English tradition -- for example, it is a central concern in Thomas Hardy, George Gissing and Samuel Butler. In Davidson this motif is usually associated or combined with the theme of religious or ethical guilt which he unsuccessfully tried to repress. He was the prodigal son who never returned home. One of his poetic self-portraits is the eponymous wastrel at the centre of one of his poems.³⁹ Townsend wrote that 'A struggle between open defiance and deeply buried guilt plagued Davidson for the rest of his life' (p. 34), and such a struggle became one of the disrupting tensions of his soul, a cause of his post-Romantic aloofness and isolation, even within his family household.

Davidson lived in Greenock from 1862 to 1886. There he attended the Highlander's Academy until 1870. His first readings were the 'classics' such as Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Bunyan, Scott and Carlyle, but he certainly became familiar also with the Romantic poets, and with Tennyson and Browning. When he was only 13, he had to leave school to contribute to his family's income. As it was to be later for Edwin Muir, his early work experience was the second important influence during those years in Scotland; the images of industrial exploitation and bureaucratic oppression which characterise many of his poems draw directly on his first-hand experience as worker in a Greenock sugar factory, and in the Public Analyst's office. Yet from these experiences Davidson also derived that interest in science which was to become part of his all-embracing philosophy. These poems record both personal and general circumstances in Greenock, a town of multiple contradictions, a sort of small-scale version of the contrasts and heterogeneity he was to face in London. In 1872 he went back to the Highlander's Academy but this time as both pupil and teacher. The job offered him the opportunity to resume his boyhood readings as well as to expand

³⁹ 'The Wastrel', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, I, p. 153.

his knowledge of foreign works in translation, especially those in German and French - Goethe, Lessing, Herder, Schiller, Hugo, Coppée, Montesquieu were among his favourites. Greenock exerted another permanent influence on his character. The surrounding countryside provided him with an escape from daily drudgery and the urban hubbub. The image of the poet roaming about in rural surroundings, among cliffs and waterfalls, in a space spiritually removed from and yet geographically adjacent with the industrial landscape, is a *leitmotif* in several verse and prose pieces. It also provided Davidson with a structural device to be used in his essays for various London magazines. The poet as perpetual wanderer and outsider in both literal and metaphorical terms is a commonplace trope in late nineteenth-century Scottish poetry, although it crops up quite frequently in contemporary English poems, such as Matthew Arnold's 'The Scholar-Gipsy' (1853). When long solitary walks lead the poet away from the modern city, towards a space imbued with childhood memories and past recollections, the literary text becomes a vehicle either for the author's sentimentality and nostalgia or for a subtler satirical vein in which he evinces an ambiguous attitude towards the transformation of modern society. Davidson's poetry encompasses both of these tendencies.

1877 was the first important turning-point in his life. In the previous year he had attended Edinburgh University to study Latin and Greek, but, instead of taking active part in the academic world, he preferred to withdraw from the buzzing university life of the city and enjoy tranquil isolation on Arthur's Seat.⁴⁰ He stayed in Edinburgh only for one term, in 1877 moving to Glasgow, where he taught in different schools in the city as well as in the surrounding district. Sometimes he would go and attend lectures at the university. This was his first real breakthrough in academic and literary circles. He became acquainted with various eminent professors as well as leading writers for the *Glasgow Herald* who were to become helpful to his career in later years. In Glasgow he met also John Nichol, Regius Professor of English Literature, who in 1878 introduced him personally to Swinburne, and who encouraged him to read contemporary poets such as Sydney Dobell and Alexander Smith, and also

⁴⁰ Turnbull, 'Introduction', p. xiii.

the American Henry David Thoreau. He became Nichol's protégé, and about the same time he made new friends: John Adam Cramb, the author of *England and Germany: Reflections on the Origin and Destiny of Imperial Britain*, William Canton, leader writer for the *Glasgow Herald*, William Symington McCormick, later Professor of English at St. Andrews, and many others.

Nichol proved to be a lasting influence on Davidson's philosophical and literary ideas. He encouraged him to pursue a literary career, and certainly played an essential part in the shaping of his unorthodox and at times radical thought. There was a tradition of radicalism in Davidson's forbears exemplified by his great-grandfather, Hugh Mitchell, a parish minister who supported the French Revolution.⁴¹ The Nichols were known as liberals in relation to the social, political, and religious issues of the day. Davidson was under Nichol's aegis when he was living in the Glasgow area, supporting himself by teaching.⁴² 1889 was another turning-point in his life: he gave up school teaching and moved on to attempt a literary career in London. Several plays and a novel were published before he left Scotland: *Diabolus Amans* (1885), a poetic drama clearly influenced by the Spasmodic school; *The North Wall* (1885), a fantastic farcical novel; *Bruce: A Drama* (1886), a chronicle play; *Smith, a Tragic Farce* (1888), another play evincing a strong link with the Spasmodics; *Plays* (1889), a collection including *An Unhistorical Pastoral*, *A Romantic Farce*, and the fantasy and pantomime *Scaramouch in Naxos*.

As soon as he arrived in the capital, Davidson found himself engulfed in the 'Pandaemonium of rebel poets'⁴³ and in the new estranging world of urban utilitarianism and pragmatism. Family income had become a central preoccupation, especially since the birth of his two sons, Menzies and Alexander, and therefore he could not afford to be fussy about what to do for a living. Hack journalism, even if profoundly despised, was a source of money which allowed him to meet the London

⁴¹ Sloan, *John Davidson: First of the Moderns*, p. 1.

⁴² At first he taught at Alexander's Endowed School in town, and, in the early Eighties, at Perth Academy, Kelvinside Academy and Hutcheson's Charity School in Paisley. He continued to teach until his marriage, in 1884, to Margaret Macarthur, whom he had met in Perth. Then he started to work in the Glasgow office of Clark's, a Paisley thread firm, but soon afterwards he went back to teaching at Morrison's Academy, Crieff, and finally in a private school in Greenock.

⁴³ Townsend, p. 46.

intelligentsia and the most eminent cultural figures of the day. He accepted such work as a means of getting introduced to the *literati*, and gradually preparing the ground for his deep desire to break into the contemporary literary scene. Moreover some of his articles concerning his urban roaming became later a sort of prose canvas for his poems. He mainly contributed to *The Speaker*, *The Glasgow Herald*, and from 1891 onwards, to the *Yellow Book*, the organ of the Rhymers' Club. He became also the sub-editor of a short-lived journal, *The Weekly Review*, edited by Yeats. He used to spend most of his day in Fleet Street, which was the heart of the publishing world, and he devoted the remaining time to his own writing, cloistered in a suburban apartment in Hornsey.

The respectable journalist and the eccentric writer: this can be seen as a Jekyll-Hyde dualism derived from this constant shifting from the public to the private spheres. Every so often, Davidson would embark on one of his lonely peregrinations in the countryside, of the kind he describes in the autobiographical sketch entitled 'A Rare Character'.⁴⁴ The protagonist is an uneducated man scorned by the cultivated milieu, alien and eccentric by virtue of his lack of scholarly knowledge -- consequently the author's sympathy is on his side. In fact, this is Davidson's *alter-ego*, one of his poetic personae embodying the sense of aloofness that Davidson had felt in London since his arrival. Although he took part in the literary debates which animated the Rhymers' Club and other similar associations, Davidson, in a way which recalls his predecessor Hogg in relationship with the 'Blackwood circle', never succeeded in truly becoming one of the central group and remained to an extent marginalised throughout his life.

Nevertheless, Davidson was not the only artistic exile in London at the turn of the century. Yeats, for example, believed that isolation was usual for the English writer:

In England the writers do not form groups but each man works by himself and for himself, for England is the land of literary Ishmaels.

⁴⁴ See Sloan, *John Davidson: First of the Moderns*, p. 49.

It is only among the sociable Celtic nations that men draw nearer to each other when they want to think and dream and work.⁴⁵

Thus Davidson's personal experience can be seen as an exemplification of a familiar phenomenon. Yeats may have had personal reasons in making this assertion, but the quotation remains important as evidence of a circumstance which in a sense subverts the common idea that Davidson never became integrated in London because of his Scottishness. Davidson's origins play an undeniable part in setting up his 'difference' from London intellectuals. They probably underscored his alienation, but they do not constitute the only explanation. In fact, several themes and ideas link him with equally unassimilated contemporary writers such as Conrad and Kipling. Had he stayed in Scotland, his whole life and destiny might have been different, but it is undeniable that from his youth Davidson showed signs of rebelliousness and eccentricity by questioning his father's religion and eventually even breaking up his own family's unity when he moved to England.

The longed-for literary success turned out to be more difficult to achieve than Davidson thought. He had to struggle against publishers' opportunism and utilitarianism from the outset. A series of literary failures added to family preoccupations brought about a breakdown around 1898. His father had died in 1891, supposedly from an illness which he contracted after Lizzie's death three years before.⁴⁶ Consequently he had to take up on himself the management of his family's finances.⁴⁷ Then a disgrace occurred which complicated the situation even more. Around the same time, his brother Thomas began to show the first signs of an irreversible insanity which would develop into clinical madness. It seems that he was also a chronic alcoholic, which exacerbated his turbulent temper. In one of his most violent fits, he attempted to kill his mother with a carving knife.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Sloan, *John Davidson: First of the Moderns*, p. 58.

⁴⁶ Some critics maintain that he died in 1892. See Eric Northey, 'The Poetry of John Davidson in Its Social, Political and Philosophical Contexts' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Newcastle, 1976), p. 47.

⁴⁷ After his mother's death, Davidson discovered shocking details in her will about how she used to lend money to a neighbour but would not help her own sons. Apparently, Davidson was deeply upset

Mental illness is a recurrent motif in Davidson's works. The theme, treated both in literal and metaphorical terms, is not new to Romantic and post-Romantic writing. For example, in Thomas Mann's novels sickness is endowed with a metaphorical meaning. In its figurative sense, mental abnormality paradoxically represents a healthy escape from corrupted normality and conventionality. In real life, Davidson was confronted with two heartbreaking cases of insanity: his brother Thomas and his friend John Barlas, both of them permanently committed to asylums. In his poems we find different forms of insanity, which the poet, by means of the subversive literary device of paradox, transforms into a symbolic state with positive connotation, allowing his megalomaniac, self-obsessed characters to become heroic figures. Such a semantic reversal implies a strong ironic attitude on the part of the poet, so that at times the readers, too, become entangled in a net of subversive and absurd ideas which render enigmatic the truth of the author's real intentions. Section II will provide appropriate examples of this complexity of forms and meanings.

The 1890s were difficult years, although Davidson's unremitting commitment to work was now and then rewarded by the success of some of his plays and poetry volumes. The latter include: *In a Music-Hall and Other Poems* (1891), *Ballads and Songs* (1894), *Fleet-Street Eclogues* (1893), *A Second Series of Fleet Street Eclogues* (1895), and *New Ballads* (1896). He obtained success also through the theatre production of *For the Crown*, his translation of Coppée's *Pour la Couronne* in 1896. His prose writing received an equally favourable critical acknowledgement, in particular his novel *Perfervid: The Career of Ninian Jamieson* (1890), and the collections of stories and sketches of *The Great Men* (1891). Other publications of the same period include *Sentences and Paragraphs* (1893), *A Random Itinerary* (1893) -- an entertaining travel journal -- the novels *Baptist Lake* (1894), and *A Full and True Account of the Wonderful Mission of Earl Lavender* (1895), and the volume of short stories *Miss Armstrong's and Other Circumstances* (1896). Yet he was generally dissatisfied and unhappy with his situation. In 1894 he wrote to Gissing describing his condition in Leopardian and existentialist terms:

by her mother's lies about her financial situation, and he showed his bitterness in the autobiographical poem 'A Woman and Her Son'. See Northey, p. 51.

No news but the old news -- work and drudgery and more drudgery than work, and not enough of either: days wasted in moping, half-hours snatched by the hair of the head out of gulfs of ennui and hypochondria.⁴⁸

The following year he moved from Hornsey to central London, in the belief that the increased closeness of the urban turmoil would make it less appealing and distracting for him. In fact, he should have escaped from London, especially after his mother's death in 1896. From then onwards his own health problems worsened. Eventually he realised that he needed a break from his dreary daily routine, and decided to go on holiday to Shoreham on the Sussex coast. Unfortunately, instead of restoring his physical and mental equilibrium, the vacation turned out to be a further source of disruption, which shattered his already damaged nerves. During the period spent in Shoreham neurasthenia, a sense of constant anxiety and listlessness were devastating, and were aggravated by his increasingly masochistic obsession with illness and ageing. He lived as a recluse, rarely leaving his room, where he devoured philosophical works which sharpened rather than soothed his ennui and hypochondria. He read especially Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Ernst Haeckle. As it has been pointed out, 'as he became more deeply absorbed in Nietzschean philosophy, he retreated further and further into angry isolation'.⁴⁹ Nietzsche's philosophy appealed to him especially because, strictly speaking, it did not constitute a philosophical system -- Nietzsche never succeeded in formulating a systematic apparatus of thoughts. In *Sentences and Paragraphs* Davidson wrote: 'Nietzsche's is the most unphilosophic mind that ever attempted philosophy [...] He starts from nothing, and ends in nothing'.⁵⁰ It was in Sussex that Davidson absorbed Nietzsche's theory of the superman, and since then it became an organic part of the *corpus* of his thoughts. This idea appeared to him

⁴⁸ Sloan, *John Davidson: First of the Moderns*, p. 123.

⁴⁹ Maurice Lindsay, 'Introduction' to *John Davidson. A Selection of His Poems*, pp 1-46 (p. 16).

⁵⁰ *Sentences and Paragraphs*, p. 82.

corroborated by historical incidents: in 1895 Lord Salisbury was back in power and British imperialism entered its most jingoistic and assertive phase.

Apart from reading philosophy, in Sussex Davidson occupied his time walking alone on the Downs. His long hermitical promenades gave him the inspiration for various articles which appeared in the *Speaker* in 1898. Two of these essays are particularly illuminating. The protagonist is always the same: the dramatic character of the Itinerant, fixed in his role of wanderer who narrates the experiences and encounters he makes. Davidson's adoption of a third-person instead of a first-person narrative reflects his tendency to remain ironically distant from his subject-matter. This is achieved through the use of dramatic monologues and dialogues similar to those characterising his poetry. *Verfremdungseffekt* -- as Brecht named it -- is essential to his art, although Davidson could never completely pass beyond the boundaries of his ego.

The first of these articles, entitled 'On the Downs', contains a particularly revealing passage concerning Davidson's opinion about his fellow countrymen:

When a Scotsman finds himself at cross purposes with life, what course does he follow? He may say to himself, as the Itinerant did, 'I will go and walk about the Downs'. Or he may say, 'I will write a great poem', or 'I will go and preach in Hyde Park'. He may say this, and he may say that, but he invariably does one of the two things. He either sits down and drinks deeply, thoughtfully, systematically of the amber spirit of his country, or he reads philosophy.⁵¹

The buoyant mockery contained in these words is also a form of self-mockery. The drinking motif with its metaphorical implications looks forward to the rhetoric of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, while the self-ridiculing tone is part of a long tradition of Scottish burlesque and humorous verse, in particular the reductive idiom

⁵¹ 'On the Downs', *Supplement to Speaker*, 5 February 1898, p. 179.

and satirical strain of eighteenth-century vernacular poetry. In short, Davidson seems to suggest that the physical and metaphysical are coexisting, even interchangeable, experiences for the Scots. Thus he anticipates MacDiarmid's universal idea that 'man's spreit is wi' his ingangs twined/ In ways that he can ne'er unwind'.⁵² This 'antisyzygy' is not an exclusively Scottish prerogative; Blake, Nietzsche and Whitman expressed the same idea although in different terms. On the other hand, the juxtaposition of the physical and metaphysical is quite a distinctive peculiarity of the Scottish poetic tradition from the Makars until the present.

In the second article the Itinerant bumps into another of Davidson's poetic alter-egos, the Man Forbid.⁵³ This figure is an extreme personification of Davidson's ideas. This version of the Itinerant is more aware of the risk involved in isolation from mankind, in the rejection of religious orthodoxy, and in solitary and remote wandering. According to him, man achieves self-knowledge not by means of institutionalised education but by plunging into the heart of nature, 'in the sunlight, and with the winds and the dew'. Yet he admits that there is a danger in this mode of living, and he calls it 'spiritual suicide'.⁵⁴ He does not explain precisely what this expression signifies, but he is apparently suggesting that any defiant rejection of established creed and conventional belief represents a threat to the individual; it involves a restless and constant need to find alternative ways to face and eventually fill the abysmal spiritual void. Colin Wilson supports this idea in his study of *The Outsider*. According to him, the outsiders' retreat from the world of common experience and values represents, and also defines, their wretchedness because they weary themselves in the search for new values to fight the spiritual crisis unavoidably resulting from their 'otherness'.⁵⁵ The Man Forbid is also the artist who passes neglected and unacknowledged by society,

⁵² *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, in *Hugh MacDiarmid*, p. 101.

⁵³ The phrase 'The Man Forbid' is taken from the witches' scene in *Macbeth*, one of Davidson's favourite plays: 'Sleep shall never night nor day/ Hang about his penthouse lid./ He shall live a man forbid'. However in the phrase there is also an echo of the description of Eve's meeting with Satan in *Paradise Lost*. Eve tells Adam that she dreamed that an angel tempted her to eat the forbidden fruit with these words: 'Forbid who will, none shall from me withhold/ Longer they offered good, why else set here?'. Both quotations cited are used by Sloan in *John Davidson: First of the Moderns*, p. 164.

⁵⁴ 'A Man Forbid', *Speaker*, 5 March 1898, pp. 297-298 (p. 297).

⁵⁵ Colin Wilson, *The Outsider* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1956), p. 143.

and who consequently chooses aloofness from it. He is a Romantic figure, but he is also a child of his own time, in particular when he expresses ideas on modern life which anticipate Futurist imagery and precepts in figurative arts and literature. For example, he seems to mimic Marinetti and his followers when he attacks bookish learning in favour of a more direct study of present life and nature. Once again, Davidson projects his own real experience upon a fictional persona, through that method which he defined as 'personation'.⁵⁶ Like the Man Forbid, at the end of the century Davidson had to endure a series of frustrated attempts to win the favour of contemporary critics and publishers.

The years between 1898 and 1904 were by no means fortunate for Davidson. He had moved from Sussex back to London in August 1898, but this time he settled in Streatham. Although he was commissioned to write several plays by both publishers and theatre managers, most of these were not successful enough to guarantee him financial security, while some projects were just castles in the air -- planned but never actually accomplished. *Self's The Man* was rejected by Beerbohm Tree, the actor-manager; his translation and adaptation of Hugo's *Ruy Blas* was performed only for two weeks; the project for a production of Mendes's *Queen Fiammetta* came to nothing, and similar failures followed.⁵⁷ He resolved then to turn to poetry. His works included a new volume of poems, which was to be called *The Last Ballad and Other Poems*, a series of 'Testaments' and 'Tragedies', and the collection *Holiday and Other Poems*. Yet he simultaneously continued to produce plays, such as *The Theatrocrat*, and the unfinished trilogy of *God and Mammon*. The latter was not composed in London but in Penzance, Cornwall, where Davidson moved with his family in 1907, with a new intention of recovering his health, but also because urban life caused him to feel an increasing sense of nausea and claustrophobia.

Yet Davidson's second attempt to regain his stability by leaving London was another failure. His health did not improve; he continued to suffer from asthma and bronchitis, and, moreover, he became obsessed with the idea that he had cancer. His hypochondria and misanthropy were so aggravated by the isolated life he led in

⁵⁶ Sloan, *John Davidson: First of the Moderns*, p. 168

⁵⁷ See especially O'Connor, p. 8.

Penzance that he even began to miss London, as he wrote in a letter to Max Beerbohm in 1908:

It is the greatness of London which is the profound subconscious satisfaction of living in it. Here, in Penzance, the wallflower blooms on the back-kitchen walls in March, arum-lilies grow like weeds, and flowering geraniums climb the house like virginia-creepers; but all that is not novelty and one season exhausts it: only primeval, everlasting things are interesting, and these frequent the flanks of mountains and the streets of cities.⁵⁸

Paradoxically life in Penzance here is dismissed as lacking all appeal while London's streets are associated with the stimulus of nature in the wild.

On the 23rd of March 1909, Davidson left his house to send Richards, the publisher, some material. He never returned. Some witnessed him entering the Star Hotel in Penzance and ordering his last luxury: a whisky and cigar.⁵⁹ In his will, which he had written the previous summer, he expressed the wish to live long enough to complete his *Testaments* and *Tragedies*, but he also added: 'I may have to die before, and at any moment now, for reasons that concern myself alone'.⁶⁰ This statement, together with the preface to the posthumous volume of *Fleet Street and Other Poems*, provided critics and biographers of Davidson with evidence that he committed suicide. The manuscript of *Fleet Street and Other Poems* was found by his son Menzies after he disappeared. The preface is the poet's last straightforward confession of his inability to endure existence any longer. 'The time has come to make an end',⁶¹ he wrote, and he gave two main reasons: financial hardships and health problems. The hardships were certainly true, while the health problems were essentially the result of his obsessions and hypochondria. A question arises: can one totally rely upon the confession of a writer who made extensive use of ironic masks and shifting poetic

⁵⁸ Quoted in Sloan, *John Davidson: First of the Moderns*, p. 262.

⁵⁹ See Sloan, *John Davidson: First of the Moderns*, p. 272, and Turnbull, 'Introduction', p. xvii.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Sloan, *John Davidson: First of the Moderns*, p. 280.

personae? Even the recurrence of suicide and death images in his work cannot be taken as irrefutable proof of his morbid inclination and thoughts in real life. Other more factual suggestions of suicide cropped up when the corpse was found by two fishermen half a mile off Mousehole, a village near Penzance. The skull was badly fractured, and this was connected with the disappearance of a gun and two cartridges from his house. It was generally concluded that Davidson shot himself as he stood facing the Cornish sea.

Nevertheless, as Sloan underlines, 'the condition of the body made it impossible to say with certainty that the man had shot himself'. Thus a mystery still surrounds his death, and given the absence of strong evidence of suicide, the final verdict of the coroner was 'Found dead'.⁶² The recurrent suicide motif added to the strongly autobiographical component of his poetry were for many critics the key to that mystery. This kind of approach though passes over the conspicuous part that self-dramatisation, and at times overdone individualism play in Davidson's writing.

Davidson was an extremely productive writer, hence any analysis of his poetry is bound to be selective. In ordering my selection I have proceeded chronologically as far as possible, and also utilised Mary O'Connor's study of Davidson in cataloguing his different kinds of poems.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 279.

⁶² Sloan, *John Davidson. First of the Moderns*, p. 284. For the details of Davidson's death see the same book pp. 283-286.

PART II

The old and the new: tradition and subversion in Davidson's poetry

If one has a healthy mind it is wholesome to go from extreme to extreme, just as a hardy Russian plunges out of a boiling bath into the snow.⁶³

This aphorism summarises Davidson's views on man as well as on poetry. Life and art were not seen by him as two separate experiences but rather as profoundly related. Davidson's poetry, even when it is 'a poetry of fact',⁶⁴ contains a strongly autobiographical element, which differentiates his work from the contemporary vogue for realistic and naturalistic objectivity. Davidson can be described as post-Romantic and pre-Modernist in virtue of this self-centredness, this interest in the individual rather than the mass, at the heart of his writing. His belief in individual power was to become a form of surrogate religion which would replace his orthodox Christianity. Unfortunately, this emphasis on the subjective source of inspiration was to be caught later in the contemporary whirlpool of jingoistic and imperialistic feelings, and turned into a kind of warped pre-fascist version of the cult of the powerful individual.

In addition to this subjective component, Davidson's verse is characterised by a strong melodramatic element. Particularly in his early poems, this proneness to melodramatisation results in a hyperbolic description of his family's poverty, so that the picture of his parents' struggle to make ends meet is a magnified image of their actual condition. His parents were both of middle-class origin, and, as long as his father was alive, they lived a generally comfortable life. On the other hand, the poems following his move to London display a genuine account of his personal affliction: in particular, they are an expression of the tension between his middle-class background and working-class lifestyle.

⁶³ *Sentences and Paragraphs*, p. 71.

⁶⁴ Hugh MacDiarmid makes use of this expression in his poem 'Poetry and Science', in *Complete Poems*, I, pp. 630-631.

In the Epilogue to his play *The Triumph of Mammon*, he wrote: 'The autobiographies of all artists will be found in their works, in their pictures, their plays and poems, sonatas and operas.'⁶⁵ Davidson's conception of a poetry which encompasses opposites and paradoxes links him both with the Romantic and Modernist traditions. The character of Cosmo Mortimer in the short story collection *The Great Men* (1891) -- a title clearly drawn from Carlyle's essay *On Great Men* -- pronounces a statement on contradiction which strongly echoes Blake's vision, as well as MacDiarmid's and Whitman's self-contradictoriness:

Contradiction! Why, it appears everywhere from the highest to the lowest -- heaven, hell - husband, wife - day, night. Gentlemen, the universe is simply a contradiction in terms.⁶⁶

Indeed contradiction, ambiguity and paradox are the essential characteristics of Davidson's work. They impinge upon the subjects and forms of his writing, and, even more interestingly, they are the poet's inner tensions and oscillations transposed into the literary text where they continue to release energy and vitalism. Davidson's text often presents an overflowing post-Blakean exuberance and a pervasive lushness of meanings and forms. Yet at the turn of the century the influence of the Romantics on his works was gradually subdued to the stronger impact of Nietzsche's philosophy. He accepted and applied to his own art the German's idea 'beyond good and evil', because he conceived that 'God, as well as the Devil, is in all men':⁶⁷

The imperfect poet, Byron, Browning, may be pessimist or optimist; but poetry itself, with the perfect poet, Shakespeare [...] represents the IRONY which is the soul of things, and of which what are called Good and Evil, Beauty and Ugliness, are attributes.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ *God and Mammon. A Trilogy. The Triumph of Mammon* (London: E. Grant Richards, 1907), p. 163.

⁶⁶ *The Great Men and A Practical Novelist* (London: Ward & Downey, 1891), p. 4.

⁶⁷ 'Tête-à-tête. Froude. Carlyle', *Speaker*, 17 June 1899, pp. 689-690 (p. 690).

⁶⁸ 'Poetry and the Something Behind Phenomena', *Speaker*, 25 March 1899, p. 346.

This is what Davidson wrote in *The Speaker* in order to justify the 'immorality' of art. In another article in the same paper, he wrote:

The poet, the artist will apply any creed, philosophy, system of morality or immorality to life, and wring the utmost terror and beauty from its action: but when he becomes the irredeemable victim of a philosophy or a creed it is all over with his poetry and art.⁶⁹

Three main concepts are here encapsulated: firstly, the role of the artist; secondly, the notion of the immorality of art and what Davidson means by it; thirdly, the asystematic and unconstrained nature of artistic expression. As far as the first idea is concerned, one of the most significant enunciations is to be found in Davidson's novel *Earl Lavender* (1895). It is uttered by the eponymous protagonist:

I, the fittest human being that ever walked beneath the moon, have been sent into the world, furnished with unerring intuition, as a guide to the people, and have tonight begun my apostate triumphantly [...] ⁷⁰

The artist, of whom Earl Lavender is the prototypical example, is the superior individual destined to change the world by means of his work. Lavender's ideas owe something to Shelley and Carlyle, but they are especially beholden to Nietzsche's thought. In another 'Tête-à-tête' article in *The Speaker* the poet is described as 'a chunk of chaos flung at the head of the world'.⁷¹ In short, the poet is here defined by using the terminology of materialism which Davidson embraced in the late 1890s, and which he carried to extreme conclusions in the *Testaments*, as well as in the poems of

⁶⁹ 'Tête-à-tête. Lord Brumm. Earl Lavender', *Speaker*, 12 August 1899, pp. 153-154 (p. 154).

⁷⁰ *Earl Lavender*, p. 106.

⁷¹ 'Tête-à-tête. Lord Smith. Lord Tennyson', *Speaker*, 1 July 1899, pp. 741-743 (p. 742).

the last years. Davidson responded in his own individual way to the contemporary Darwinian theory of the survival of the fittest by re-interpreting it in such a way as to suit his own *Weltanschauung*. He found this theory particularly fascinating because it provided a scientific explanation for his own idea of the superior individual, but, on the other hand, he undermined the notions of evolution and natural selection by opposing them to the ideas of 'devolution' and 'chemical selection',⁷² whereby man represents the highest evolutionary stage of universal Matter, and hence is immune to further development.⁷³ For Davidson, man gradually turned from an embodiment of becoming into one of being and perfection. In other words, he delivered to the world his own version of the *Übermensch*.

Davidson's opinion concerning the morality of art is synthesised in one of his paradoxical aphorisms: 'Poetry is immoral. It will state any and every morality.' In other words, art was for him an all-embracing world where opposites can coexist, independent of any systematised creed, and essentially characterised by 'liberty of utterance.'⁷⁴ Therefore Davidson intends poetry's immorality as its quality of being multifarious and dealing with every kind of experience, even with what Davidson called, as I have previously pointed out, the 'offal of the world', or the brutalities and bitterness of modern life. Ultimately, this kind of poetry shows that the universe is amoral, and that the only truth is Matter. Conventional Victorian morality inevitably rejected this view, as is evinced by the numerous derogatory articles on Davidson's poetry in the contemporary papers. From the 1890s onwards, Davidson's main objective was to write poems about the soul and the body seen as one identical substance, and about the theory of Universal Matter. This new poetry was to incorporate both the beautiful and the ugly, because, in Davidson's own words:

⁷² 'Preface' to *The Theatrocrat* (London: E. Grant Richards, 1905), p. 25, 57.

⁷³ In *Earl Lavender*, Chap. IX (pp. 188-205), the protagonist encounters a monstrous figure reminiscent of the sentimental character in *The City of Dreadful Night* who crawls backwards to retrace his origins. The deformed creature in Davidson's novel is a parody of Evolutionary Man: its body is the rather grotesque and surreal fusion of an ape and a human being. The fact that the man is the Scot Rorison is certainly not an accidental detail: the novel was written when Davidson's revolt against his father's religion and generally Scottish fanaticism became particularly acrimonious, hence his parody and satire of the Scotsman oppressed by his own past. On the other hand, there is also an element of self-caricature and self-mockery in the figure of the easily animated Scotsman.

⁷⁴ 'The Art of Poetry', *Speaker*, 4 February 1899, pp. 153-154 (p. 153).

Poetry is not always an army on parade; but sometimes it is an army coming back from the wars, epaulettes and pipe-clay all gone, shoeless, ragged, wounded, starved, but with victory on its brows.⁷⁵

The slight enthusiasm contained in these words was later worn out by depression and ennui. It has been argued that Davidson committed suicide because he was convinced that he had cancer, which would hamper the mission with he felt himself engaged -- '[...] the liberation of mankind from religion, and the dissemination of an epoch-making truth -- that matter is the only reality, and that man is the material universe become conscious'.⁷⁶

The third requisite of poetry -- that it should not depend on any strict system of ideas and rules -- is associated with both notions of freedom of utterance and immorality. Based on this view is Davidson's conclusion that Wordsworth was immoral and radical because he rejected pre-conceived systems, and replaced them with his own vision of a spiritual Nature. But he also thought that Wordsworth committed the fatal mistake of turning his poetic vision into metaphysics.⁷⁷ The 'new poetry' or 'new cosmogony', as Davidson defined it, had to re-interpret the meaning of the past. Without utterly repudiating it, Davidson thought it necessary to 'read the present into it',⁷⁸ to make use of the past to discover the missing links which are necessary to analyse and understand the present. He maintained that the entry of science into the realm of poetry marked an essential literary revolution, because it turned poetry into a superior dimension where opposites could meet and coexist. Hence the shifting motifs and styles of his works, the simultaneous treatment of diversified subjects such as urban problems and nature, science and myth, realism and romance, and, behind and beyond all this, his ironical, paradoxical vision of the world - - materialistic and visionary at the same time.

⁷⁵ 'The Criticism of Poetry', *Speaker*, 4 March 1899, pp. 258-259.

⁷⁶ Paul Turner, 'John Davidson: the Novels of a Poet', *Cambridge Journal*, 5 (1951-1952), 499-504 (p. 499).

⁷⁷ Davidson speaks about Wordsworth in the Preface to *The Theatrocrat*.

⁷⁸ 'Tête-à-tête. Lord Smith. Lord Tennyson', p. 742.

Davidson's poetic output presents us with a vast range of different forms and themes. With the same ironic attitude that he assumes to deal with religious subjects, Davidson treats conventional literary forms and genres. The traditional names are all there: eclogue, ballad, song, farce, pastoral, pantomime, testament; nevertheless, most of his texts present an ironic sub-text behind the heterogeneity and mélange of styles and forms. This multifariousness was one of the aspects of Davidson's art which won the favour of MacDiarmid. Aldous Huxley called attention to the unevenness of the Scot's work, to his 'tendency to slip suddenly from beauty to absurdity'.⁷⁹ His inner tensions and ambivalence, seen in his response to London cosmopolitan life as opposed to the parochialism of his native country, become transparent in his writing. Because of this ambiguity, his poetry has been identified both with Decadence and Counter-Decadence.

Davidson never solved his psychological conflicts and, consequently, his poetry, in spite of the differences between the first lyrics and the last blank verse poems, presents various thematic and formal constants. He started off by writing poems which are certainly indebted to Scottish balladry as well as to Scott's verse romance, and then, when he was in London, he moved on to other poetic forms and genres, in particular music-hall and urban poems, but without abandoning completely the old ones. Even if in the last years his interests seemed to focus mainly on long free verse poems, Davidson still continued to produce lyrics. In *Sentences and Paragraphs* he prophetically wrote:

The long luxurious idylls, the long discursive dramatic monologues, the garrulous story of eld, and the long rhapsodies where thought and emotion are lost in a revel of colour and sound, are probably about to give place to a shorter flight and a compacter form.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ A. Huxley, 'John Davidson', in *The English Poets*, ed. by T. H. Ward, V, pp. 573-575 (p. 574).

⁸⁰ *Sentences and Paragraphs*, pp. 100-101.

Topics recur in poems belonging to different periods: poverty, urban drudgery, anti-Christian values, revolt, sickness. The reader finds it difficult to locate a single voice beyond his multifarious poetic personae and alter egos.

The critic Mary O'Connor pointed out that in Davidson's last poems one central voice does emerge: that of the ironic and detached observer who watches and criticises contemporary society. In particular, she identifies the evolved voice of the 'Random Itinerant' in London.⁸¹ But is there still an histrionic and ironic component which continue to create confusion and ambiguity? Perhaps Davidson's voice is better defined by terms such as 'other' and 'eccentric'. Mainly it is a voice speaking about a reality felt as hostile and spiritually remote, be it Scotland or England. The eccentricity of his position is emphasised by the adoption of conventional forms to express a subversive, unorthodox world-view, or by the use of a traditional form to deal with a subject-matter which does not conventionally suit that form.

The analysis which follows will focus on this central aspect of Davidson's poetry. I will focus on poems included in his major collections: *In a Music-Hall and Other Poems* (1891); *Fleet Street Eclogues* (1893); *Ballads and Songs* (1894); *A Second Series of Fleet Street Eclogues* (1896); *New Ballads* (1897); *The Last Ballad and Other Poems* (1899); the *Testaments* (1901-1908); *Holiday and Other Poems* (1906). Some poems were reprinted in posthumous editions such as *Fleet Street and Other Poems* (1909).⁸²

i. The ballads

Davidson wrote his very first ballad when he was twelve,⁸³ and continued to experiment with the genre till the end of the century -- it is not coincidental that in 1899 he wrote a poem under the self-explanatory title of *Last Ballad* (1899). The turn

⁸¹ O'Connor, p. 14.

⁸² For the analysis I used the texts edited by Andrew Turnbull, whereas the categorisation and genre division of the poems draws on Mary O'Connor's study. Hence the different sections: ballads; music-hall poems; eclogues; testaments and tragedies; miscellaneous last poems.

⁸³ It was a ballad on the defeat of the Moors by Ramiro, the King of Spain. See Mary O'Connor, p. 27.

of the century marked also a turn in Davidson's production. From 1899 onwards he began writing what he called 'new poetry' in which the dualism of romance and history gives way to pre-existentialist themes and to an increasingly deeper descent into the poet's -- or his alter-egos' -- subconscious experience. The poems included in *In a Music-Hall and Other Poems* (1891) evince both in their form and content affinities with Scottish traditional ballads, whereas the ballads of later collections present unconventional themes and a more sophisticated style. Nonetheless, it must be noted that from the very beginning these poems show a taste for exotic themes which links Davidson with the interest in orientalism typical of the Decadents.⁸⁴ Tradition and novelty, past and present are thus mingled and sometimes give rise to a paradoxical juxtaposition of motifs.

The main themes characterising Davidson's early ballads are those of the traditional romantic ballad: love, battle, and the supernatural. In 'A Sail' (*In a Music-Hall*) the contemporary Aesthetic and Dandy taste for colours and decorations is interwoven with the Scottish traditional theme of Fairyland. The protagonists -- a group of sailors -- reach Edenic islands inhabited by fairy creatures. They symbolise a sort of lost Eden -- an image which the twentieth-century Scottish Renaissance will revive, outstandingly in the poetry of Edwin Muir. The 'isles of the blest' visited by the sailors are a mythical image of Scotland, and they are depicted by the poet rather nostalgically, thus suggesting that the poem was probably written after his departure from Scotland. His early poems, including the lyrics, are sometimes permeated with childhood recollections. Davidson's religious background also often crops up in these poems, and it is often associated with love. An example is 'For Lovers', in which Davidson offers an early example of his eclectic Muse by blending classical mythology with modern pastoral themes. The rhythm and metre of Davidson's early ballads generally comply with traditional ballad schemes -- lines of four and three stresses alternatively -- but their stanza length varies. The predominant rhyme scheme is ABAB, less frequently ABCB, with its typical story-telling cadence, and the speaking voice shifts between first-person and third-person narration.

⁸⁴ An example is given by 'A Ballad of the Exodus from Houndsditch' (*Ballads and Songs*, 1894).

'No Man's Land' is an example of the former, and 'Thomas the Rhymer' of the latter. Both are included in *In the Music-Hall and Other Poems*. 'No Man's Land' contains many Romantic echoes: the resonance of a pagan world, the figure of the enchantress reminiscent of Keats's *Belle Dame Sans Merci*, the voyage motif. The 'No Man's Land' of the title indicates another form of 'otherworldiness', like the Edenic isles in 'A Sail'. The underlying escapist element is in tune with ideas of Decadence, while the general atmosphere and setting resemble those of the supernatural ballad. Yet the figure of the sorceress brings in a morbid element which hardly occurs in traditional ballads; the poet uses her as a vehicle to convey the deception and evil inherent in Beauty. A similar element crops up in 'Thomas the Rhymer'. The title immediately calls to mind one of the most popular Scottish ballads, as well as one of the most popular characters of folk literature. But Davidson's poem is very different from the original model, in that his seer is not the direct observer of the supernatural agency described in the ballad but only an interpreter. The first-hand experience is that of the Earl of March, who represents Thomas's antagonist because of his sceptical and scoffing attitude towards the seer's prophetic power. The wizard predicted that the 16th of March would be the stormiest day ever occurring in Scotland. In fact, that same day turns out to be sunny and mild, but when the Earl tells him about the uncanny episode which occurred during the king's wedding -- the appearance of a skeleton leaving behind him the odour of death -- Thomas sees it as an ominous token of forthcoming calamity. Historically, March 16th 1286 was the day when King Alexander III died while he was riding in Fife. The last verses of the ballad exploit this tragedy:

Said then the panting messenger

'The King of Scots is dead!'

The earl grew white. 'The King! -- Alight'.

But he rode on ahead.

'The heir's a baby over seas;

In truth are we stormstead'⁸⁵

The last lines refer to Alexander III's only daughter and heir Margaret, who was to marry Magnus, King of Norway. In the poem the semi-legendary figure of Thomas the Rhymer stands for the poet-hero who, because of his superhuman abilities, does not mingle with ordinary men exemplified by the Earl. Thomas is considered mad by the philistine Earl, but eventually Thomas proves to be right. Just so will the poet-prophets of the new era, envisaged by Davidson, truly become, in Shelleyan terms, 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world'. The seer's eccentric character and 'otherness' from the mass is an image of the ideal poet.

Another ballad of the same period portraying the figure of the outsider is 'The Gleeman' (*In the Music-Hall*). The Gleeman singing in the market-town while the market-people, completely indifferent to him, run up and down preoccupied by their business affairs, is another image of the outcast poet setting his art against the philistinism and utilitarianism of the city's bustle. He is an early version of The Man Forbid, and a juvenile mouthpiece for Davidson's philosophy, in particular when he sings:

'Man by hunger unsubdued,
Conqueror of the primal curse,
Master of his subtlest mood,
Master of the universe.'⁸⁶

At the end of the poem the Gleeman asserts his abhorrence for profit-making people and their spiritual void by deserting the buzzing market-place. Davidson's personal ideas always seep in even when he makes use of a conventionally impersonal form like the ballad. 'In no way is Davidson's ballad voice the truly impersonal voice of the traditional ballad [...] Davidson's voice is personal and literary',⁸⁷ argues O'Connor.

⁸⁵ 'Thomas the Rhymer', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, I, pp. 37-39 (l. 85).

⁸⁶ 'The Gleeman', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, I, pp. 44-46 (l. 71).

⁸⁷ O'Connor, p. 30.

This means that even when he absorbs the traditional structural components of the ballad, such as the narrative framework, and the use of figurative language, Davidson then personalises the form by instilling into it his own moral and philosophic ideas. At times he can be more subversive and resort to traditional stories and legends but only to subvert their original meaning, thus paradoxically undermining those traditions by re-writing them from his radical and eccentric viewpoint.

This topsy-turvy treatment of the ballad genre is less conspicuous in the early ballads, because they were composed at a time when the poet was still strongly interested in tradition and history. Nonetheless, some of them already evince unconventional aspects related both to their content and form. Apart from 'Thomas the Rhymer', two other examples of this kind of subversive verse are 'The Queen of Thule' and 'John Baliol at Strathcathro'. The former is centred on the romantic *Liebestod* motif, and it is imbued with echoes of the Medieval romance of courtly love and Shakespeare's tragic epilogues. The Queen of Thule⁸⁸ loves a social inferior while her subjects expect her to get married to the Prince of Orcadie.⁸⁹ Victorian morality is rejected when the poet describes the Queen surreptitiously leaving her residence to meet her lover 'in a forest-glade'.⁹⁰ At the same time, the description of a love relationship which contrasts with the demands and codes of society reflects the new contemporary morality about free love which finds expression, for example, in the fiction of Grant Allen, in particular in his best remembered novel *The Woman Who Did* (1895), in which the protagonist emerges as a fascinating version of Davidson's outcasts. Her strong femininity and obstinate willingness to defend her own rights characterise also the protagonist of Davidson's ballad:

You told me that you loved me, sir;
And sure it made me rue
That you must pine; for love of mine
Can never be for you.

⁸⁸ Thule is an ancient name for the Shetlands.

⁸⁹ Ancient name for Orkney.

⁹⁰ 'The Queen of Thule', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, I, pp. 47-50 (l. 8).

[...]

I like you not, dark man; your brow
 Is heavier than the night.
 Away, away! Come, Harold, now,
 And end my woman's fright! (ll. 25, 37)

Love is presented here as a form of escapism from social and political duties yet leading to both self-destruction and the destruction of other individuals. On the other hand, love is a unifying principle: the death that it brings about is also the means of ultimate never-ending union. The Shakespearean triple killing which closes the ballad with the Prince murdering the Queen's lover, the Queen piercing the Prince and finally the Prince running her through with the selfsame sword, has a strong dramatic effect, although the language is simple and the rhythm gently cadenced by the surrounding still landscape:

In snowy white the pale moon rolls
 As in a winding-sheet
 Three corpses pale; and three new souls
 Are at the judgement seat. (l. 121)

Shakespearean echoes, added to a general atmosphere reminiscent of Pre-Raphaelite medievalism and Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1859), recur in another ballad included *In a Music-Hall and Other Poems*: 'John Baliol at Strathcathro'. The poem records a historical event, but, as in the previous ballad, the central aspect is the dramatic quality of the protagonist and the significance of his role and stance in relation to Davidson himself. John Baliol seems to be another failure: similar to the Queen of Thule, but for different reasons, he is unable to lead his own nation successfully and his attempt to combat English supremacy by allying with France is violently crushed by Edward I's invasion of Scotland, followed by the rebel's resignation of the Scottish crown. The ballad is entirely centred on the episode of the resignation. From the very start, John Baliol appears as a Scottish version of Richard

II; his long tirade in front of the king bespeaks his weak character but also his honesty. He may be faulty as a king but the human dignity with which he declares his own limitations bestows on him a certain air of regality:

A gorgeous flourish as of victory,
And Baliol entered, vested like a king,
Crowned, sceptred, almost looking like a king.⁹¹

From the very start, he is also another personification of the poet's state of 'otherness' from contemporary society. The English king and his court respond with condescending and teasing remarks to his open confession:

King Edward here broke in on him, and said:
'An histrionic king! What say you, lords,
Shall he speak on, or go out sighing now?' (l. 45)

In fact, the resigning king of Scotland does not seem to be touched by the taunting words of his adversaries, and he continues his harangue undisturbed, which sounds more like soliloquy than an address to the monarch. He surrenders crown and sceptre to King Edward without either pretence or exaggerated meekness. He simply strips his humanity of all superimposed illusion such as his youthful ambition to become a leader or a hero. Now he confesses that he is 'no doer' (l. 125), that he does not look anymore for any heroic glorification but yearns only for a new freedom:

'Off, purple dress! I cast thee from me here
With hundredfold the joy I did thee on.
Methinks the martyr, tortured, wrenched, and broke,
From his torn mortal garb escapes at last
To find less ease than now my being feels.' (l. 141)

⁹¹ 'John Baliol at Strathcathro', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, I, pp. 32-35 (l. 1).

Davidson saw freedom as one of the main prerequisites of the artist, although he also recognised the danger and difficulties involved in the achievement of such an ideal. The ballad ends tragically with the imprisonment of John Baliol and his son, which may be seen as a dramatisation of the frustrations and rejection which the artist must face within society. Edward's definition of Baliol as a madman and fool (l. 130) alludes to a commonplace label attached to the artist. Baliol's counterblast is his wittiest retort to the king:

'Madmen are sometimes simply overwise;
 All men are fools, yea, very full of folly;
 Folly is ignorance, and every soul
 Can have a knowledge such a little share,
 Omniscience sees a gross and foolish world;
 The greatest fool is he who cannot know.
 Adversity has taught me many things;
 I am content to be a fool and mad.' (l. 131)

The second collection of poems which deserves particular attention is *Ballads and Songs* (1897). Lindsay considers it to be '[...] Davidson's best book of verse',⁹² and certainly it contains some of his best unconventional ballads. These differentiate from the previously analysed poems in that they show a new philosophical and moral interest on the part of the author. Instead of dealing with more or less traditional tales of love, adventure and supernatural agencies in a rather conventional form, in the late 1890s Davidson's interest shifted to issues and problems of a more specifically philosophic nature. His main concern in these ballads is the condition of different categories of individuals (the writer, the artist, the lover, the nun, the workman), and their moral interrogatives and anxiety in front of a specific situation. It is especially in these ballads that Davidson exhibits the subversive potential of his ironic posture; in

⁹² Lindsay, 'Introduction', p. 40.

many cases he makes use of Christian mythology and doctrines but only to refute their essential precepts on such themes as suicide, punishment, salvation and damnation. In this subversive practice he resembles James Thomson, in particular he recalls the reversed Christian dogma in the cathedral episode of *The City of Dreadful Night* (1874). The late poem 'Cain' represents a paradigmatic example of this reversed Christian mythology.

Earlier examples are the two poems respectively entitled 'A Ballad of Hell' and 'A Ballad of Heaven'. Apparently, 'A Ballad of Hell' is another traditional tale of love and betrayal. The female protagonist is deceived by her lover, who urges her to take her life while he will take his, so that they can be united forever in hell, but, when it is too late, she will discover that her lover plotted that stratagem in order to feel free to marry his cousin. There is already an irreligious, unorthodox element in the use of the suicide-motif as a means of achieving eternal unity in hell, but the most interesting aspect of the ballad consists of an unconventional representation of hell and heaven as two adjacent reigns, both geographically and spiritually close. This paradoxical situation reaches its climax at the very end, when the woman, having discovered the betrayal, very fiercely and majestically decides to abandon hell and marches towards heaven with an easiness and self-control which leave the inhabitants of hell completely abashed:

How long she stayed I cannot tell;
 But when she felt his perfidy,
 She marched across the floor of hell;
 And all the damned stood up to see.

The devil stopped her at the brink:
 She shook him off; she cried, 'Away!'
 'My dear, you have gone mad, I think.'
 'I was betrayed: I will not stay.'⁹³

⁹³ 'A Ballad of Hell', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, I, pp. 51-53 (l. 77)

The orthodox, dogmatic vision of hell is upset by the humanity of the devil addressing her by means of affectionate epithets and by the final choral rejoicing of the damned at the sight of the girl who is able to overcome that 'great gulf set between' (l. 88) heaven and hell. These aspects themselves represent that bridge or marriage between heaven and hell which is inconceivable according to Christian doctrine; Davidson shakes its foundations by conceiving a moral link between the two spheres, and suggesting that the path to heaven always passes through hell:

Seraphs and saints with one great voice
 Welcomed that soul that knew not fear;
 Amazed to find it could rejoice,
 Hell raised a hoarse half-human cheer. (l. 93)

'A Ballad of Heaven' is one of the first examples of the poetry of the underdog with a visionary quality added to it. The protagonist is a musician who dedicates his life to the composition of a great work which can save himself and his family from their hand-to-mouth existence:

He wrought at one great work for years;
 The world passed by with lofty look:
 Sometimes his eyes were dashed with tears;
 Sometimes his lips with laughter shook.

His wife and child went clothed in rags,
 And in a windy garret starved:
 He trod his measures on the flags,
 And high on heaven his music carved.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ 'A Ballad in Heaven', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, I, pp. 53-56 (l. 1)

When his wife and child die, the artist curses the world and denies the existence of God in utterly pessimistic terms:

‘We drop into oblivion,
And nourish some suburban sod:
My work, this woman, this my son,
Are now no more: there is no God.

‘The world’s a dustbin; we are due,
And death’s cart waits: be life accurst!’
He stumbled down beside the two,
And clasping them, his great heart burst. (l. 65)

Despite his anathema, the artist opens his eyes again in heaven, where he not only meets his wife and child but is also rewarded by hearing his own music played in the celestial spheres. God explains to him that miraculous event:

He doubted; but God said ‘Even so;
Nothing is lost that’s wrought with tears:
The music that you made below
Is now the music of the spheres.’ (ll. 101-104)

The glory awaiting the artist in the after-life counterbalances the frustrations and hardships he suffered in his earthly existence; society rebuffed him and his art because only a superior justice and an otherworld can recognise his genius. The vision of heaven and the music of the spheres reflect the traditional Christian iconography, but the poet does not dwell long on the religious implications of the overall picture. Heaven is not so much the Christian Paradise where the just receives their deserts as the metaphor of a spiritually and morally higher dimension in which the wonder and sublimity of art can be fully appreciated. Although it is difficult to identify, this dimension is certainly at odds with ordinary society, and it represents perhaps a first

step towards that pseudo-Calvinistic vision of the elect which Davidson embraced in later years, devoid of any religious association and loaded with Nietzschean overtones.

Another important ballad of the same period which displays Davidson's ironic treatment of Christian imagery is 'A Ballad of a Nun'. Once again Davidson exploits the possibilities of the ballad-form, such as the dramatic narrative and images, the iambic metre, the quatrain stanza, but then reworks it to adapt it to his own philosophic and moral intentions. The story of the debauched nun is not new, and indeed some critics have traced the origin of Davidson's ballad back to medieval and modern sources. The ballad's predecessors are a thirteenth-century collection of stories used by preachers called *Gesta Romanorum*, St. Alphonsus Liguori's *Glories of Mary*, and some modern texts such as Jose Zorrilla's *Margarita*, Adelaide Anne Proctor's 'A Legend of Provence' (*Legends and Lyrics*) and Villier de l'Isle-Adam's 'Soeur Natalia'.⁹⁵ A similar story is also told by Denis Diderot in *La religieuse* and by Alessandro Manzoni in *I Promessi Sposi*. Davidson's ballad is not merely about or against Victorian morality; the nun's departure from the convent to seek love and physical experience represents a quest for a more complete, all-embracing knowledge of existence than that she acquired in the secluded convent world. The city which sends her musical and visual signals from the valley stands for the new and the subversive for which she yearns; it signifies the attraction of the forbidden but especially of the possibility which she perceives there to make herself part of the life of the senses and of nature:

Her hungry heart devoured the town:

'Heaven save me by a miracle!

Unless God sends an angel down,

Thither I go though it were Hell.'

She dug her nails deep in her breast,

Sobbed, shrieked, and straight withdrew the bar:

⁹⁵ Sloan, *John Davidson: First of the Moderns*, p. 117.

A fledgling flying from the nest,
 A pale moth rushing to the star.
 [...]
 'Life's dearest meaning I shall probe;
 Lo! I shall taste of love at last!
 Away!' She doffed her outer robe,
 And sent it sailing down the blast.⁹⁶

Love is here seen as a means of grasping the essential meaning of life and discovering the divinity of man and nature.

What at first appears as a downward journey into sin and blasphemy -- 'I leave the righteous God behind;/ I go to worship sinful man' (l. 67) -- turns out to be a learning process, a sort of *Bildungsgedicht*, which, following a dialectic pattern, leads the nun back to her starting point -- the convent -- but carrying along with her a deeper understanding of life and a renewed and closer relationship with nature. Anticipating MacDiarmid, Davidson seems to say that decadence is an essential step towards understanding of oneself and life. The circular structure of the ballad is marked by the repetition of certain lines at the beginning and the end, but especially by the final words pronounced by the Virgin Mary, which echo what the nun said to herself after breaking her vow. In fact, the Virgin's words do not simply repeat but endow the nun's thoughts with a higher spiritual significance, and add to the conviction that the natural and spiritual worlds are not two separate spheres but profoundly intermingled, or that the spiritual is encapsulated in the physical, and that it is necessary to be part of the latter in order to grasp the former.

The second part of the poem, after the nun leaves the town and sets out on her journey back to the convent presents a visionary quality. Her exit from the city in 'her ragged robe' (l. 114), aged but experienced and ready to purge her sin, marks the passage from the down-to-earth description of the city Carnival, and the love intercourse between the nun and the 'grave youth nobly dressed' (l. 78) to a more

⁹⁶ 'A Ballad of a Nun', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, I, pp. 67-70 (ll. 49, 61).

evanescent and elusive situation. Taking into account the supernatural strain characteristic of many ballads, the last stanzas may be seen as describing an after-life situation: the nun's ghost leaves the city and is welcomed to an earth-like heaven by a Virgin disguised as wardress of the convent:

The wardress raised her tenderly;
 She touched her wet and fast-shut eyes:
 'Look, sister; sister, look at me;
 Look; can you see through my disguise?'
 [...]
 'You are sister to the mountains now,
 And sister to the day and night;
 Sister to God.' And on the brow
 She kissed her thrice, and left her sight. (ll. 137, 149)

Or could it all be a dream? The nun's repressed subconscious desires emerge during a sort of didactic dream in which the young nun, similar to Blake's *Thel*, discovers her own sexual life far from her ordinary existence, and finally returns to the known familiar world with a deeper understanding of herself and humanity. There is certainly an inscrutable mystery in the rapid fading away of the nun's glamour and fairy-like appearance when she leaves the city to go back to the convent. Yet the poet never completely shifts from realism to fantasy, or from the physical to the metaphysical world. Conversely, he shows them as united and complementary; in order to achieve moral completeness and grasp the truth of life, man needs to tread on both grounds.

On the other hand, the poet's elusiveness and deliberate obscurity allows another, almost antithetical interpretation of the ballad, which turns the philosophic significance of the nun's quest into a cynical view of religion and its appropriation on the part of the protagonist. In other words, what happens exactly to the nun in the city? Why does she seem to age so quickly? Why does she decide to go back to the convent then, and who is really that wardress who introduces herself as the Virgin

Mary? The physical consequences of her sinful act might suggest the crude reality of a sexually transmitted disease:

But soon her fire to ashes burned;
 Her beauty changed to haggardness;
 Her golden hair to silver turned;
 The hour came of her last caress. (l. 101)

Accordingly, her decision to re-enter the secluded life of the convent might be dictated by remorse and guilt, which she expects to purge by resorting to religion as an escape clause, and by taking the veil again in front of the Virgin (perhaps a figment of her imagination):

And with the word, God's mother shone:
 The wanderer whispered, 'Mary, hail!'
 The vision helped her to put on
 Bracelet and fillet, ring and veil. (l. 145)

The nun can be seen also as another figure of the poet, but this time of the poet who eventually decides to go back to his roots, to his original land, even if the return implies hypocrisy and acceptance of all those values which he had felt as entrapping. In this respect, the nun is like the young protagonist of one of Davidson's short stories, who, after embarking on her own quest of self-discovery in London, goes back to Edinburgh and consents to live a life based on those selfsame conventions against which she had rebelled.⁹⁷

Because of its subversive morality -- or moral eccentricity -- and its unorthodox idea of religion, 'A Ballad of a Nun' has given inspiration to humorists and parodists to produce their own version of the poem.⁹⁸ Davidson himself wrote a

⁹⁷ John Davidson, 'Alison Hepburn's Exploit', in *Miss Armstrong's and Other Circumstances* (London: Methuen & Co., 1896), pp. 75-156.

⁹⁸ See Townsend, pp. 175-178.

comic version of the ballad in the form of a dialogue between God, Christ, Mary and Lucifer. After discussing the misinterpretation of his precepts by the Church's representatives with Christ and Mary, God gives Lucifer permission to tempt a nun, the doorkeeper of a convent, and orders Mary to go and replace the nun as wardress:

GOD. Go to it, old fellow.

Exit LUCIFER.

Now I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll give these people another chance. Lucifer -- what an invaluable servant he is! -- will succeed with the nun. And you, my dear, will go down and keep her place while she's enjoying herself with the boys. You'll tell her when she comes back, and get it made known, and if that doesn't open their eyes to my real sentiments then I'm a Dutchman.⁹⁹

'A Ballad in Blank Verse of the Making of a Poet' appeared first in *Ballads and Songs*. Davidson then revised it and inserted it into the new collection of *Selected Poems* (1905), and this is the version printed by Turnbull. As the title suggests, the poet defies the conventions of the ballad genre by adopting free verse and no particular stanza form. But Davidson's personalised appropriation of the genre involves not only the form but also the content of his poems. This particular ballad, despite the presence of a narrative aspect, is characterised by realistic images and personal, autobiographical elements which set it completely apart from the typically unspecified and symbolic setting and atmosphere of the traditional ballad. It bears resemblance to a poem included in *In a Music-Hall and Other Poems*: the lyric called 'On a Hill-Top'. The unnamed place which is similarly described in both poems is easily identifiable as Greenock:

A hectic village -- pleasure's summer daughter --

A bay with boats, a firth most like a lake,

⁹⁹ Quoted in Townsend, pp. 501-502.

With ruby stain spilled on the hither water,
 And on the further, shade in mass and flake,
 Between the mountain and the mountains lay
 Unseen by him. [...] ¹⁰⁰

His father's house looked out across a firth
 Broad-bosomed like a mere [...]

This old grey town, this firth, the further strand
 Spangled with hamlets, and the wooded steeps,
 Whose rocky tops behind each other press,
 Fantastically carved like antique helms
 High-hung in heaven's cloudy armoury,
 Is world enough for me. ¹⁰¹

It is a ballad about himself and his own experience as a creative artist. Yet it is also a ballad about any artist and, specifically, any poet who realises the inevitability of moral and intellectual clashes between himself/herself and society. To begin with, the 'He' referred to -- with a technique of ironic distance which emphasises the universal meaning of the poem -- is a newly born artist who has just come to a self-realisation of his own poetic aspiration, and who, in order to follow this aspiration, must confront the objection of his strict Calvinist father. The clichéd son-father conflict is there, but Davidson uses it to introduce a wider issue which transcends the merely personal sphere. The central image is that of the rebel-poet and the apostate, of the post-Romantic Promethean artist who defies all systematised creeds to replace them with one belief only: that Man is God and contains 'the whole compass of the universe',¹⁰² any other creed is just 'The petrification of a metaphor'.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ 'On a Hill-Top', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, I, pp. 36-37 (l. 7).

¹⁰¹ 'A Ballad in Blank Verse', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, II, pp. 293-302 (ll. 1, 31).

¹⁰² William Wordsworth, *The Prelude. A Parallel Text*, ed. by J. C. Maxwell, 1850: XIV. 92.

¹⁰³ 'A Ballad in Blank Verse', l. 425.

There are obvious links with the Romantics. The overture of the poem, with the description of the young man's fresh imagination and nature-inspired genius, is reminiscent of the depiction of the blooming creativity of young Wordsworth in *The Prelude*. The speaking voice in 'A Ballad in Blank Verse' is not the protagonist himself but an omniscient narrator, and yet it does not take long to discover that the third-person narrative is a fictional device. As I have mentioned before, individual and universal, realism and symbolism are concomitant aspects in this ballad as well as in Davidson's poetry in general. The ballad begins with what looks like an introductory five-line stanza, which recurs in the poem with slight variations twice more, thus acting as a refrain:

His father's house looked out across a firth
 Broad-bosomed like a mere, beside a town
 Far in the North, where time could take his ease,
 And Change hold holiday; where Old and New
 Weltered upon the border of the world. (l. 1)

The later quotations read as follows:

For this was in the North, where Time stands still
 And Change holds holiday, where Old and New
 Welter upon the border of the world,
 And savage faith works woe.

[...]

For this was in the North where Time stands still,
 And Change holds holiday; where Old and New
 Welter upon the border of the world,
 And savage creeds can kill. (ll. 139, 355)

The second quotation comes after a long section which describes the relationship between the boy and his parents until his mother's death. The young poet's sinful

decision to renounce his father's religion caused her death: 'Slowly he broke his mother's tender heart,/ Until she died in anguish for his sins' (ll. 131-132). Similarly, the third quotation follows the passing away of his father, but this time the responsibility of the son is underlined even further by the use of strong language: 'savage creeds can kill'; the son's ruthless rejection of orthodox Christianity and his alternative belief in man's instinctive life appear as the weapon indirectly destroying his father's existence. Nevertheless, the expressions 'savage faith' and 'savage creeds' are deliberately ambiguous. 'Savage' could refer to Christian faith as well, or to any dogmatic creed which can be confused with superstition when it becomes fanatical and ruthlessly strict. Davidson's rebellion against external authority accompanied him until the end. In the play *Mammon and His Message* (1908), the poet is God and his message against mechanicalism is an exaltation of man's inner power and natural godliness:

[...] I'll carve the world
In my own image, I, the first of men
To comprehend the greatness of mankind;
I'll melt the earth and cast it in my mould,
The form and beauty of the universe.¹⁰⁴

The similarity between these lines and the Ballad's young poet's ideas is strikingly patent in these words:

I am a man set by to overhear
The inner harmony, the very tune
Of Nature's heart; to be a thoroughfare
For all the pageantry of Time; to catch
The mutterings of the Spirit of the Hour
And make them known; and of the lowliest

¹⁰⁴ *Mammon and His Message*, in *John Davidson: A Selection of His Poems*, ed. by M. Lindsay, pp. 169-180 (pp. 173-174).

To be the minister, and therefore reign
 Prince of the powers of the air, lord of the world
 And master of the sea. Within my heart
 I'll gather all the universe, and sing
 As sweetly as the spheres; and I shall be
 The first of men to understand himself [...] (l. 435)

The main idea throughout the ballad is that of freedom. The choice of free verse reinforces this central preoccupation, whereas the style is ironically adapted to the language and tone of the Protestant preacher -- there are many Biblical references in the poem and a visionary quality throughout it, sustained by a deliberately grand style. Here is his father talking to him:

My son, reject not Christ; he pleads through me;
 The Holy spirit uses my poor words.
 How it would fill your mother's heart and mine,
 And God's great heart with joy unspeakable,
 Were you, a helpless sinner, now to cry,
 'Lord I believe: help Thou mine unbelief'. (l. 71)

But the young boy conceals other dreams and his visions do not concern Christian repentance but the beauty and sensuality of the ancient pagan world:

He clenched his teeth; his blood, fulfilled of brine,
 Of sunset, and his dreams, boomed in his ears.
 A vision rose before him; and the sound
 Husky and plaintive of his father's voice
 Seemed unintelligible and afar.
 He saw Apollo on the Dardan beach:
 The waves lay still; the winds hung motionless,
 And held their breath to hear the rebel god,

Conquered and doomed, with stormy sobbing song,
 And crashing discords of his golden lyre,
 Reluctantly compel the walls of Troy,
 Unquarried and unhewn, in supple lines
 And massive strength to rise about the town. (l. 77)

The underlying myth is that of Apollo and Poseidon who, following their revolt against Zeus, were sent to king Laomedon to work as servants at the construction of Troy. Father-son contrasts are therefore depersonalised and universalised by resorting to the eternal significance of myth. Whenever his father tries to persuade him to embrace Christian faith, he is distracted by visions of pagan deities and legendary figures such as Aphrodite and Adonis. His father's attempt to convert him to Christianity is successful only for a brief instant; during an evening walk along the beach, the boy's 'hurtling thoughts' (l. 213) lead him to a new understanding of his own mission in the world. As if visited by an epiphany, he suddenly realises what his course will be:

'I'll have no creed',
 He said. 'Though I be weakest of my kind,
 I'll have no creed. Lo! there is but one creed,
 The vulture-phoenix that for ever tears
 The soul of man in chains of flesh and blood
 Riveted to the earth; the clime, the time,
 Change but its plumage. [...]

Henceforth I shall be God; for consciousness
 Is God: I suffer; I am God: this Self,
 That all the universe combines to quell,
 Is greater than the universe; and *I*
 Am that I am. To think and not to be God? --
 It cannot be! Lo! I shall spread this news
 And gather to myself a band of Gods -- (ll. 215, 226)

He has already made his choice: to abandon the religion of his family and replace it with his megalomaniac, pseudo-Cartesian belief in his all-embracing mind and in the innate godly nature of men like him -- a kind of masonry of the *Übermensch*. In *The City of Dreadful Night* James Thomson refers to a Brotherhood 'of the saddest and the weariest men on earth';¹⁰⁵ now Davidson conveys the image of an elitist portion of humanity, of a category of the elect not according to any conventional Calvinist creed but because of their innate superiority over other men. As to the reason of their superiority, the poet does not seem to provide any obvious explanation, whereas it is clear that he is already paving the way for his later imperialistic and jingoistic enthusiasm. From the very beginning, Davidson seems already to be thinking of his nation as the northern part of a wider country; he does not call it Britain but a sense of Britishness can already be perceived in the first lines, in which the North is not precisely identified as Scotland but, conversely, retains a mythical aspect:

His father's house looked out across a firth
 Broad-bosomed like a mere, beside a town
 Far in the North, where Time could take his ease,
 And Change hold holiday; where Old and New
 Weltered upon the border of the world. (l. 1)

Later on this vague unnamed place shades into a more specific setting, still anonymous but, as I have said, clearly recognisable as the town of Greenock. The link between the two spaces -- a mythical, timeless space and a real, geographic space -- consists of their being a place where old and new meet and mingle, where the eternal natural cycles and the endless seasonal course meet the world of Change, of human toil and urban mutability. Hence the description of the 'grey town', 'That pipes the morning up before the lark/ With shrieking steam, and from a hundred stalks/ Lacquers the sooty sky' (l. 24). The image of the new industrial town, affected by the

¹⁰⁵ James Thomson, *The City of Dreadful Night*, XI. 27.

contemporary search for material prosperity, stands very vividly in front of our eyes; the poet succeeds in revealing the characteristics of modern urbanisation by means of effective onomatopoeia and alliteration, as when he depicts the town as a place where:

[...] hammers clang
On iron hulls, and cranes in harbours creak
Rattle and swing, whole cargoes on their necks;
Where men sweat gold that others hoard or spend,
And lurk like vermin in their narrow streets (l. 26)

On the other hand, the poet shows that even such an industrialised cityscape can become both poetic object and source of inspiration. When his father calls him from his mythical reverie back to reality, the young poet still continues to contemplate Aphrodite, who becomes the allegory of himself, of his position of outcast from family and society:

‘Oh, let me be!’
The dreamer cried, and rushing from the house
He sought the outcast Aphrodite, dull,
Tawdry, unbeautiful, but still divine
Even in the dark streets of a noisome port. (l. 143)

This position is once more asserted in the last part of the poem. Here we find another pronouncement of his anti-dogmatism; his creed is that he does not believe in any specific creed, and refuses to cling to one specific position. The poet asserts himself as an individual encompassing the universe, as the microcosm embodying the unity-in-diversity of the macrocosm:

No creed for me! I am a man apart:
A mouthpiece for the creeds of all the world;
A soulless life that angels may possess

Or demons haunt, wherein the foulest things
 May loll at ease beside the loveliest;
 A martyr for all mundane moods to tear;
 The slave of every passion; and the slave
 Of heat and cold, of darkness and of light;
 A trembling lyre for every wind to sound. (l. 426)

These verses clearly foreshadow MacDiarmid's Drunk Man's creed that he will 'aye be whaur extremes meet'.

The next collection of poems which deserves attention is that of *New Ballads* (1897). In particular, I have selected two ballads which are linked with 'A Ballad in Blank Verse' because of their subject-matter: they are both about the poet, and simultaneously they present an individual situation loaded with symbolic and universal value.

'A Ballad of a Poet Born' is conventional in metre and rhythm, but the content is peculiar and reflects Davidson's obsession with artists or surrogate artists who struggle to leave to the world some great work which may assure them posthumous recognition. More precisely, the central concept throughout the poem is the Romantic idea of the immortality of art opposed to the transience of human existence. This is particularly stressed in the concluding lines:

Dead, while upon the pulsing string
 Still beat his early rhyme --
 The song the poet born shall sing
 Until the end of Time!¹⁰⁶

Yet the ballad is important also for another reason. It was written at the end of the century, when Davidson's materialistic ideas began to take shape but continued to

¹⁰⁶ 'A Ballad of a Poet Born', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, I, pp. 94-98 (l. 193).

battle for some time against his early belief in man's inner power and a sort of pantheistic vision of nature. The ballad presents us with two poets: on the one hand, the old poet who still sings about nature and love; on the other, the young disillusioned poet who sees the whole universe as matter, including humanity. They meet and enter in conflict in a hall where both of them perform their art; the old poet has just come back from his aimless peregrinations and a life spent aloof from other human beings:

For years he wandered far and near,
And begged in silence sad;
The children shrank from him in fear;
The people called him mad. (l. 113)

The young poet is his successor in the hall where the community gathers to listen to his song, but he sings about other things; his vision is pessimistic whereas his predecessor's was optimistic, he is a materialist while the previous singer was 'Companion of the winds and waves/ Companion of the stars' (l. 15). The old Davidson finds his mirror reflection in the young poet, whose words anticipate his later convictions and also link him with James Thomson's anti-Romantic vision of universal nature in Section XVII of his *magnum opus* where the stars' 'thick procession of supernal lights'¹⁰⁷ is described as indifferent to men, deluded victims of a pathetic fallacy. Davidson's words read as follows:

'The earth, a flying tumour, wends
Through space all blotched and blown
With suns and worlds, with odds and ends
Of systems seamed and sewn;
[...]
'Behold! 'tis but a heap of dust,
Kneaded by fire and flood;

¹⁰⁷ *The City of Dreadful Night*, XVII. 3.

While hunger fierce, and fiercer lust,

Drench it with tears and blood.

[...]

'Fill high the bowl! We are the scum

Of matter; fill the bowl;

Drink scathe to him, and death to him,

Who dreams he has a soul.' (ll. 129, 137, 149)

In short, this is a ballad about Davidson's split loyalties and inner divisions, and the fact that in the end the old traditional poet is still welcomed by the community signifies that, at the time, old and new values were still colliding within him. Nevertheless, the poem is not merely autobiographical. Davidson's psychological conflicts may also be those of any individual who is confronted with inner and outer change, who has left behind a world and entered a new one, both attractive and frightening. The poem might ultimately be about the condition of the exile poet who realises the impossibility of shaking off the past and embracing a totally new life without being torn within by doubts and dilemmas.

Another poem included in *New Ballads* which concerns the position of the poet within society and his relationship with his parents is the non-conventional ballad entitled 'A Woman and Her Son'. The metrical features of the poem defy any strict categorisation, but it is clear that the style and language are very close to the blank verse and everyday-speech quality of his later poetry. This is typical of Davidson: the form eludes simplistic definitions just as the protagonist shuns all dogmatic systems and creeds. The central theme is the relationship between mother and son, which comes to the fore through their dialogue. His mother is on the brink of death when he enters her room, and ruthlessly gives vent to his own frustrations, and casts in her teeth the religious upbringing that she and her husband gave him. His words are cruel, and his rebelliousness against his parents' religious faith is too hard-hearted and fierce to win our sympathy.

In the ballad, the protagonist's mother is about to die inside her room while outside the death-in-life of the city inhabitants rolls on. The contrast between the

stillness of the room and the noises coming from the street is remarkable but the underlying question is whether those noises signal real life opposed to the slow dying away of his mother's existence, or a life which is spiritually void and degraded by the mechanical world:

He set his teeth, and saw his mother die.
 Outside a city-reveller's tipsy tread
 Severed the silence with a jagged rent;
 The tall lamps flickered through the sombre street,
 With yellow light hiding the stainless stars:
 In the next house a child awoke and cried;
 Far off a clank and clash of shunting trains
 Broke out and ceased, as if the fettered world
 Started and shook its irons in the night;
 Across the dreary common citywards,
 The moon, among the chimneys sunk again,
 Cast on the clouds a shade of smoky pearl.¹⁰⁸

In fact, the world both outside and inside appears as devoid of essential meaning and both physically and spiritually dark; the real light, as opposed to the artificial flickering of the street lamps, is cast by the stars and the moon, but they are far off and can only highlight the squalor of the world underneath. Contrary to Alexander Smith's description of Glasgow, Davidson's urban imagery in this poem does not reveal its own peculiar beauty, and therefore is more similar to James Thomson's picture of the city, even if the firmament above it is not utterly indifferent:

The moon among the chimneys wandering long
 Escaped at last, and sadly overlooked
 The waste raw land where doleful suburbs thrive. (l. 24)

¹⁰⁸ 'A Woman and Her Son', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, II, pp. 302-308 (l. 157).

The outside world is described as one of melancholy meanness:

The working-men with heavy iron tread,
 The thin-shod clerks, the shopmen neat and plump
 Home from the city came. On muddy beer
 The melancholy mean suburban street
 Grew maudlin for an hour; pianos waked
 In dissonance from dreams of rusty peace,
 And unpitched voices quavered tedious songs
 Of sentiment infirm or nerveless mirth. (l. 15)

The world inside the room is similarly gloomy, and gloom also inhabits the soul of the protagonist. He tries to persuade his mother that there is no after-life, that the preachers' words are all fables, and that she was the victim of 'a crude evangelist' (l. 67), his father. His words are an anathema against the impositions and the emotional tyranny he was subjected to in his childhood, and against all creeds which limit individual expression and freedom:

We had no room, no sport; nothing but fear
 Of our evangelist, whose little purse
 Opened to all save us; who squandered smiles
 On wily proselytes, and gloomed at home. (l. 94)

Davidson is certainly speaking here through the voice of his alter-ego, although there is an exaggerated acrimony in his words, and it may be that some of the autobiographical details are amplified in order to produce a stronger dramatic effect. His mouthpiece is a materialist thinker who tries to demolish his mother's convictions:

This castle in the air, this Heaven of yours,
 Is the lewd dream of morbid vanity.

For each of us death is the end of all;
 And when the sun goes out the race of men
 Shall cease for ever. It is ours to make
 This farce of fate a splendid tragedy

[...]

Oh good and evil, heaven and hell are lies!
 But strength is great: there is no other truth:
 This is the yea-and -nay that makes men hard. (ll. 138, 148)

The last line echoes the son's earlier pronouncement about his dismissal of Christian axioms and faith in human power:

Oh, surely now your creed will set you free
 For one great moment, and the universe
 Flash on your intellect as power, power, power,
 Knowing not good or evil, God or sin,
 But only everlasting yea and nay. (l. 40)

There is an obvious reference to Carlyle in the final words, in particular to Teufelsdröckh's antisyzygy of 'The everlasting No' and 'The everlasting Yea' in *Sartor Resartus* (1834).

Davidson's belief in universal matter and his egotistic conception of the individual reach a climax in the conclusion of the poem. Irony is the main component here. The supernatural of the traditional ballad appears under a new disguise. His mother is dead but all of a sudden life seems to take hold of her again for a brief moment in which her son wants to know whether she has seen that Heaven of which she has always dreamed:

'I remember, dear',
 She whispered, 'very little. When I died
 I saw my children dimly bending down,

The little ones in front, to beckon me,
A moment in the dark; and that is all.' (l. 198)

Her son explains to her that she saw them before dying -- '[...] the last attempt/ Of fancy to create the heart's desire.' (l. 203) -- and begs her to be hard, to rebuke what he calls 'the ancient jugglery that tricks the world' (l. 188), the churchmen's stories about heaven and hell. He begs her to face death without relying on false illusions and hopes but merely on her powerful humanity. Hardness is all she needs; his words are bitter, his desire to convert her to his ideas is relentless. Once again the dramatic effect of the whole scene is overdone, but in the end his direct confrontation with his mother's death seems to smooth down his megalomaniac, and in itself single-minded abnegation, of all creeds. We confront another ambiguous ending, hard to decipher and open to various interpretations. At first he addresses his mother in a tone and with words which are paradoxically fanatical:

'Mother, rejoice;
For I shall make you glad. There is no heaven.
Your children are resolved to dust and dew;
But, mother, I am God. I shall create
The heaven of your desires. There must be heaven
For mothers and their babes. Let heaven be now!' (l. 238)

His behaviour shows that he is not less fanatical than his parents, that there is an element of folly in any extreme position, be it in favour or against dogmas: 'They found him conjuring chaos with mad words/ And brandished hands across his mother's corpse' (l. 244). Nevertheless his mother's death seems to produce a tempering effect on his harshness:

Thus did he see her harden with a hiss
As life went out in the cold bath of death;
Thus did she soften him before she died. (l. 248)

The poet calls both mother and son 'bigots' (l. 249), because both of them are respectively either too weak or too strong in face of two opposite ideologies: the mother is too fearful and subjected to her husband's strict creed, while the son is too strong and adamant in sustaining his anti-dogmatic ideas. Thus, in the end, the protagonist takes his mask off and lets us realise that he is not simply Davidson's *dramatis persona* but the self-projection of only one side of his personality. It seems to me that here Davidson is still able to treat with clever self-irony his most blameworthy personality traits, such as his obsession with man's power and his megalomania. In other words, he is able to project his self out of himself, to look at it dramatically and ironically, and therefore he can say that two individuals such as the son and the mother portrayed in the ballad are 'fateful souls that plague/ The gentle world' (l. 249). In later poems this ability seems to have disappeared, in particular in the *Testaments* and in his imperialistic poems.

In 1899 Davidson published *The Last Ballad and Other Poems*. The poem which gives the title to the whole collection was then republished in *Selected Poems* (1905) under the new title 'A Ballad of Lancelot'. Turnbull included this later version in his edition of Davidson's poems. On the one hand, the poem reflects the contemporary taste for classical legends and figures -- Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1859-1885) and Morris's *The Defence of Guenevere* (1858) are two examples in this vein. On the other hand, however, Davidson's ballad differs from the conventional verse romance. Love is the central motif but it presents various thematic ramifications. The lustful love between Lancelot and the Queen is certainly part of the whole picture but the pivotal image is another: the figure of Lancelot as outcast, as exile from the world of ordinary experience to enter 'The wave-worn kingdom of romance',¹⁰⁹ a kind of 'otherworld' or underworld where he comes across eerie creatures and experiences an *Orlando Furioso*-like madness. His journey into the 'forest's beckoning gloom' (l. 76) is a sort of quest whereby he is confronted with his own animal instincts projected

¹⁰⁹ 'A Ballad of Lancelot', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, I, pp. 135-143 (l. 72).

outside, and personified by the beasts he encounters along the path. There is a Dantesque element in the meeting with the wild animals of the forest; in a manner similar to Dante, Lancelot is made to face tormenting sense of guilt and his sinful sensual life. He remains aloof from society for a year, and, before returning back to it, he stops to contemplate it from the top of a hill. The ballad then becomes visionary. In the following lines, Lancelot, gazing at the world from an elevated position, calls to mind King Arthur in *The Faerie Queene* as well as Hogg's Kilmeny:

He left behind the spell-bound wood;
 He saw the branchless air unfurled;
 He climbed a hill and trembling stood
 Above the prospect of the world. (l. 157)

The world appears to him as a pastoral idyll but his soul is still 'darkened' (l. 180), and he is looking for a way to set it free. Another vision seems to offer him the way:

But from without deliverance came:
 Afar he saw a horseman speed,
 A knight, a spirit clad in flame
 Riding upon a milkwhite steed. (l. 181)

It turns out that the 'golden knight' is his son, Sir Galahad. He becomes the vehicle for Lancelot's recollection of the past, and of its final, liberating outpouring from his soul. It becomes clear then that his aimless wandering was a form of self-punishment for a 'trespass' (l. 245) he committed in the past: the union with a witch who betrayed him by giving him a magic potion that confused his senses, and made him believe that the woman was Guinevere. Once his long repressed past is released, he can see again his goal in front of him:

[...] 'And I
 Shall follow now the Holy Grail,

Seen, or unseen, until I die:

My very purpose shall avail

'My soul', he said. By day, by night

He rode abroad, his vizor up;

With sun and moon his vehement sight

Fought for a vision of the cup -- (l. 293)

Through his son, Lancelot recovers his sense of identity and his life is given meaning. But this apparent victory is short-lived. The previous lines are immediately followed by 'In vain' (l. 301) -- isolated and emphasised at the beginning of the stanza. Thereafter in the last stanzas, by repeating the same words, with only a few variations, that he used at the beginning of the ballad, Davidson suggests that it is impossible to overcome the strongest passions and the demands of our senses. As in the beginning, the image of Guinevere and Lancelot's love for her prevails over his duty to the King and over his quest for the Holy Grail. Physical life is therefore shown as more powerful than spiritual life, and the past personified by his son can only momentarily reawaken his moral duties, because love is a stronger force which cannot be abated. The end and the beginning form a circular structure although Lancelot's psychological state is different in the last stanzas: the dilemma remains, visions of love continue to haunt him while he is accomplishing his duty as knight, but he can now live with the dilemma without anguish, because he has come to an acceptance of the contradictions of life. The ballad is Davidson's song of the earth against the moralising tendencies of the time.

As to the reason why it is called 'The Last Ballad', Mary O'Connor suggests that with this poem 'Davidson has reached the limits of the ballad form' (p. 48), because he is not concerned with external events and adventurous situations but with the inner conflicts and dilemmas of the protagonist. The events in the poem are derived from Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, but they are not the focus of the ballad. They function as a pretext to introduce Lancelot's psychological division between a physical life which has love at its centre and a spiritual life which would lead him away from

Guenevere, in order to pursue the search for the Holy Grail and accomplish heroic deeds. Finally the natural world and the life of the senses win over the metaphysical sphere. As O'Connor has pointed out,

Lancelot's abandonment of the Holy Grail [...] leave[s] us not with a pessimistic capitulation, but with a faith in the physical world which will eventually lead to a more vigorous affirmation in Davidson's later Materialism. (p. 48)

'The Last Ballad' offers another example of how Davidson is able to exploit the possibilities of a particular poetic form without respecting the traditional canon but indeed defying some conventional features of that form such as the impersonal narration.

A different ballad, although similarly unconventional, is 'A Ballad of a Workman', which first appeared in *The Saturday Review* in 1896, and was later included in *New Ballads* and in *Selected Poems* (1905). Turnbull's edition includes this latter version. The dramatic monologue of the protagonist -- a workman -- alternates with the third-person narrator. There is also another character in the poem, that of an old traveller who tells the workman the unbelievable story of his life. Nonetheless, this figure could be interpreted in a different way; instead of another character, he could well be regarded as the outer projection of some of the workman's thoughts and desires. In this case, the ballad would thus present, to use Davidson's terminology, another 'personation' of a psychological dilemma: the old traveller is an inner voice, trying to persuade the workman that he can be a new Prometheus or Ulysses, and defy destiny; but there is another opposite voice within himself which proposes a different kind of human heroism, similar to the notion of moral firmness in *The City of Dreadful Night*. As in 'A Ballad of a Poet Born', Davidson's theory of Matter and exalted egotism find a voice here, but the poet is evidently still caught between two possibilities, and cannot make up his mind.

The crucial moment of the poem is when the workman encounters 'a tottering ancient travel-worn' (l. 62), who seems to have lived across the centuries and gathered

all the knowledge of the world -- therefore a kind of *Übermensch*, and also a figure foreshadowing T. S. Eliot's Tiresias. He offers the workman the possibility to change the course of his life by becoming immortal. The old traveller has decided to leave the earth because now he wants to find an answer to his metaphysical doubts:

'Until the end I meant to stay;
But thought has here so small a range;
And I am tired of night and day,
And tired of men who never change.

'All earthly hope ceased long ago;
Yet, like a mother young and fond
Whose child is dead, I ache to know
If there be anything beyond.' (l. 137)

He leaves the workman a scroll in which he can find the magic secret which will grant him immortality:

When his strange guest was laid in earth
And he had read the scroll: 'Behold,
I can procure from Nature's hearth
The Seed of Life, the Seed of Gold!

'For ever young! Now, time and tide
Must wait for me; my life shall vie
With fate and fortune stride for stride
Until the sun drops from the sky.' (l. 157)

In a sense, this is what he had always hoped for: to become powerful enough to change human destiny and defy the laws of nature. Before meeting the stranger, he had already expressed his ultimate goal in life, that is, to invent 'A means to amplify

the range/ Of human power; find the soul wings,/ If not the body!' (l. 58). But his dream of overcoming the confines of humanity is a fleeting fancy; at the end of the poem, he goes back to his ordinary life and, like Lancelot, accepts the contradictions of human nature:

'I drop the dream of high renown:
A nameless private in the strife,
Life, take me; take me, clanging town;
And death, the eager zest of life.' (l. 201)

Finally, his choice is to endure existence and face death, to yield to the laws of nature. Thus even the clanging town and his toil become meaningful, while the workman becomes the prototype of the modern hero:

'The hammered anvils reel and chime;
The breathless, belted wheels ring true;
The workmen join the ends of time,
And forge and mould the world anew.' (l. 205)

Davidson never abandoned the ballad form. In the last decade of his life he produced a ballad which is seen by many critics as his most successful attempt in the genre. I refer to the poem called 'A Runnable Stag', which is included in the volume of *Holiday and Other Poems* (1906). It is certainly one of his most powerful poems, and doubtless the poem with the most effective and captivating rhythm he ever composed. Indeed rhythm is the real protagonist; it is the liberating factor of the dynamic force imprisoned in each line, and it generates meaning. The whole poem describes a chase: a group of hunters and their pack of hounds are after a stag which outruns them, and finds escape by jumping from a clifftop into the sea. It is a poem about suicide, therefore with a prophetic significance, but it is also more than that. The central theme is once again individual freedom and personal victory by means of self-determination and sacrifice. Escape through death is an extreme solution, but

Davidson presents it here as a liberating act which raises the victim to the status of hero. What essentially makes the stag the personification of human heroism and inner strength is his acceptance of death and his deliberate choice to embrace it as a way to escape the nullification of dignity which capture, or death by other hands, would have implied. Physical destruction is preferred to moral annihilation.

The rhythm of the verses is also that of the chase; it is pressing and pushes the reading restlessly forward. As we read the lines, we follow the hunters' hurried chase and the stag's escape in front of them. The words, often repeated, seem to run after each other too:

When the pods went pop on the broom, green broom,
 And apples began to be golden-skinned,
 We harboured a stag in the Priory coomb,
 And we feathered his trail up-wind, up-wind,
 We feathered his trail up-wind --
 A stag of warrant, a stag, a stag,
 A runnable stag, a kingly crop,
 Brow, bay and tray and there on top,
 A stag, a runnable stag.¹¹⁰

Holbrook Jackson talked about the 'musical realism' of the poem.¹¹¹ Through alliteration, assonance and the use of parataxis, the poet successfully conveys the movement and sounds of the chase. From the very beginning the stag stands out from the surrounding scene because it is majestic, and even the hunters recognise its kingly and mighty appearance. Apparently the speaking voice is the communal voice of the traditional folk song; in fact the 'We' is a first-person narrator speaking on behalf of all his fellow hunters, and, contrary to the communal voice of many popular songs, it excludes the reader, even if it betrays a certain admiration towards the stag. The stag

¹¹⁰ 'A Runnable Stag', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, I, pp. 159-160 (l. 1)

¹¹¹ Holbrook Jackson, 'John Davidson', in *The Eighteen Nineties. A Review of Art and Ideas At the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (London: The Harvester Press, 1976), pp. 177-192 (p. 185).

stands dramatically against his persecutors; he forms a unity with nature whereas they are the usurpers of nature. Metaphorically, the stag is the poet and the hunters are detractors or obnoxious critics haunting and baiting him without success. He is the poet who would never give up his unity with nature -- or perhaps, by this stage in his work, it would be more appropriate to say with Matter -- and therefore would rather resort to extreme solutions than yield to his persecutors' calumny. In other words, he is the poet, or any artist, who prefers to remain 'other' from social and cultural manipulation in order to preserve his own personal freedom. If one accepts the prophetic value of the poem, the whole run of the stag 'By perilous path in coomb and dell/ The heather, the rocks, and the river-bed' (l. 46) could be seen as a metaphor for Davidson's strenuous effort to assert himself in the literary scene. Before sinking in the Severn Sea, the stag has a vision which is prophetic too:

When he turned at bay in the leafy gloom,
 In the emerald gloom where the brook ran deep,
 He heard in the distance the rollers boom,
 And he saw in a vision of peaceful sleep,
 In a wonderful vision of sleep,
 A stag of warrant, a stag, a stag,
 A runnable stag in a jewelled bed,
 Under the sheltering ocean dead,
 A stag, a runnable stag. (l. 64)

The mouth of the Severn is not too far from the place where Davidson took his life; whether the poet had the same vision of peace and the 'fateful hope' (l. 73) which lit up the eye of the stag is a secret he carried away with him, but certainly the poem throws some light on a possible reason for Davidson's suicide. In front of the vastness of the sea and the sublime turmoil of the waves, the stag perceives the possibility of his own salvation and eternal freedom:

So a fateful hope lit up his eye,

And he opened his nostrils wide again,
 And he tossed his branching antlers high
 As he headed the hunt down the Charlock glen,
 As he raced down the echoing glen
 For five miles more, the stag, the stag,
 For twenty miles, and five and five,
 Not to be caught now, dead or alive,
 The stag, the runnable stag. (l. 73)

The significance of the title is obscure. Davidson intended perhaps to put emphasis on the restless rhythm of both the chase and the verses starting from the very title: 'runnable' echoes the speediness of the chased and the chasers, but it is also used ironically because the stag can only potentially be run down, while in fact he manages to escape. In the end, it is actually the hunters' hope to catch him which runs down, while their potential victim becomes a stoic figure and a symbol of superior human dignity.

ii. The music-hall poems

The ballad allowed Davidson to explore modern issues or personal experiences by looking at them from a mythical and at times supernatural perspective. Despite their descriptive realism and unconventional aspects, most of his ballads retain the legendary or semi-legendary air of the traditional ballad, and concern characters and situations invested with a symbolic or prototypical value. The present section deals with a diverse range of poems, but they all share an essential aspect: in them Davidson is mainly concerned with the life and situation of certain members of the urban population -- in particular, the working-class, the underdog and the music-hall artists. There is still a symbolic component in the description of these characters -- each of them is representative of a peculiar social status -- but they move in a more realistic environment, such as that of the contemporary city. Davidson's copious production in

this genre makes it impossible to analyse it exhaustively; thus it will be necessary to select a few representative examples.

Some of Davidson's ballads present a technique which becomes pivotal in the music-hall poems. I refer to the dramatic monologue of the protagonists, who introduce themselves and their plight through song, in a tone which shifts between humour and melancholy, or is sometimes half-humorous and half-tragic. One of Davidson's early dramatic monologues is 'Ayrshire Jock' (*In a Music-Hall and Other Poems*). The protagonist immediately introduces himself in the opening lines; the speaking 'I' is apparently a self-confident and self-assertive individual who makes an open confession about his innermost aspirations and his personal choices. Nonetheless, this image slowly shades into that of a completely different man, who is by no means sure of himself, nor morally firm in his convictions, but afflicted by psychological tensions and dilemmas.

The question of identity and the protagonist's strenuous but unsuccessful effort to define his loyalties are the focal themes of the poem. Because of his wavering ideas and at times contradictory statements about himself and his work, John Auld is the author's *persona*, although he is from Ayrshire, and, like Davidson, he is unable to leave his past and origins behind. Both his family and the Burns tradition continue to haunt him even in his present urban life. His self-portrait reflects the condition of many indigent people, in particular of the artist who struggles to make ends meet, and is victimised by a society which does not recognise original genius but only hackneyed imitation:

Just as the penny dreadfuls make
 The 'prentice rob his master's till,
 Ploughboys their honest work forsake,
 Inspired by Robert Burns. They swill
 Whisky like him, and rhyme; but still
 Success attends on imitation
 Of faults alone: to drink a gill

Is easier than to stir a nation.¹¹²

Hence his invective against Burns imitators and, indirectly, the derivative Kailyard tradition. Yet this apparently strong position underlies one of his inner tensions, since his origins are steeped in the tradition pioneered by Burns, and, a few lines before the quoted passage, he admits that 'Whisky and Burns made [him] a poet' (l. 64). It is obvious that his apprehension of Burns's work clashes with the contemporary creation of the Burns cult and myth, which maimed instead of paying tribute to the Ayrshire poet. Before MacDiarmid, Davidson attacked those who counterfeited Burns's original genius by creating an Anglicised or 'mongrel Scotch', and thus giving rise to a hybrid tradition and a hybrid language to express it:

They drink, and write their senseless rhymes,
 Tagged echoes of the lad of Kyle,
 In mongrel Scotch: didactic times
 In Englishing our Scottish style
 Have yet but scotched it: in a while
 Our bonny dialects may fade hence:
 And who will dare to coin a smile
 At those who grieve for their decadence? (l. 73)

¹¹² 'Ayrshire Jock', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, I, pp. 11-14 (l. 65). Davidson's criticism of Burns's imitators looks forward to MacDiarmid's sarcastic long comment in *A Drunk Man*, for example when Macdiarmid writes:

You canna gang to a Burns supper even
 Wi'oot some wizened scrunt o' a knock-knee
 Chinees turns roon to say, 'Him Haggis -- velly goot!'
 And ten to wan the piper is a Cockney.

No' wan in fifty kens a wurd Burns wrote
 But misapplied is a'body's property,
 And gin there was his like alive the day
 They'd be the last a kennin' haund to gi'e [...]

Burns' sentiments o' universal love,
 In pidgin English or in wild-fowl Scots,
 And toastin' ane wha's nocht to them but an
 Excuse for faitherin' Genius wi' *their* thochts. (p. 84)

Davidson is here enacting his satirical part; the pun on the falsified Scots produces a humorous effect even if the underlying meaning was a serious concern to the poet. This kind of bathos is typical of the Scottish vernacular tradition. On the one hand, the protagonist hints that Scottish style and language should be purged of English influence; on the other, he straightforwardly declares that his models are English and that he deliberately chooses to write in English. Nevertheless, his shifting moods and his unavoidable backward looking put in question the freedom of his choice, and at the end of the poem, it becomes clear that the adoption of the English language and tradition is imposed on him by the demands of the contemporary literary scene. Although he despises 'Scotchness' (the hackneyed and distorted version of the real Scottish tradition) he also resents the social constraints which deprive him of freedom of expression. His imitation of Shelley and his successors gained him the respect of the *literati*:

I rhymed in English, catching tones
 From Shelley and his great successors;
 Then in reply to written groans,
 There came kind letters from professors. (l. 85)

In the following stanza the truth comes to the fore: writing means income for him, it is described in terms of market productivity rather than personal success. With a remorseful tone and a sense of frustration he admits that his 'very loftiest ambition' (l. 104) was tamed by a series of unsuccessful attempts to publish his own poetry.

Gradually, it becomes clear that, despite the approval coming from his superiors, John's situation is a source of constant vexation, and when his exasperation towards the present becomes unbearable, he is visited by the ghosts of the past, by images of his distant boyhood and of a lost rural tradition, opposed to his current existence in Glasgow. The past comes back in the form of a vision with ironic Kailyard details:

I'll draw the blind and shut -- alas!
 No shutters here! [...] My waning sight
 Sees through the naked windows pass
 A vision. Far within the night
 A rough-cast cottage, creamy white,
 With drooping eaves that need no gutters,
 Flashes its bronze thatch in the light,
 And flaps its old-style, sea-green shutters. (l. 33)

It can be speculated that the last line helped George Douglas Brown's to find a title for his anti-Kailyard novel, *The House with the Green Shutters* (1901).¹¹³ Another curious coincidence is the fact that John Auld, like George Douglas Brown, is from Ayrshire. By juxtaposing past and present, and recording John's inner tension between the nostalgic recollection of the past and the urgent recall to the present -- '[...] I'll turn my back;/ I would not see my boyhood's days' (l. 41) -- the poet avoids falling into a sentimental mood, and cleverly succeeds in offering a criticism of the Kailyard by exploiting conventional elements of that tradition.

Anti-Kailyard is also the semi-comic address of the protagonist to his 'whisky toddy' (l. 112). This episode has evident links with eighteenth-century vernacular drinking songs, but John Auld is in many respects also the ancestor of MacDiarmid's Drunk Man. Whisky is a 'golden juice' (l. 57) for the deluded protagonist, and in the last lines it becomes a sort of total experience which pleases both soul and body. In fact, it is a fake Golden Age syrup, and Davidson hints at the disruptive effects of dipsomania by presenting it as a deceitful escape from daily preoccupation and pressure. Even though the general tone is fairly light-hearted throughout the poem, a sense of loneliness and doom impinge upon John's harangue:

¹¹³ According to Douglas Gifford the title of Brown's novel might have been suggested by a passage in Stevenson's 'A Gossip on Romance' in which he refers to the 'green shutters of the inn at Burford' as a symbol of an apparently splendid reality which strongly contrasts with the depressing life both inside the place and the people attending it. See Douglas Gifford, 'Myth, Parody and Dissociation: Scottish Fiction 1814-1914', p. 257n.

That's good! To get this golden juice
 I starve myself and go threadbare.
 What matter though my life be loose?
 Few know me now, and fewer care.
 Like many another lad from Ayr --
 This is a fact, and all may know it --
 And many a Scotchman everywhere,
 Whisky and Burns made me a poet. (l. 57)

The image of the solitary artist, victim of social manipulation and personal frustration, contrasts with the notion of a fellowship of shared destiny indirectly contained in that line: 'and many a Scotchman everywhere'. Paradoxically -- and subconsciously -- John Auld has recovered a sense of community from the repressed memories of the past; in the alienating city, the only way to eschew the drama of utter isolation is to see himself as part of a community of individuals who are undergoing similar experiences and are affected by similar dilemmas. In other words, his situation can be compared to that of other Scottish people who moved from their native peripheral region to the focal centre of culture and progress in order to seek literary fortune or a more comfortable life. Davidson was part of this virtual community of exiles either at home -- like John Auld who feels alienated in Glasgow -- or beyond the Scottish border.

In 'In a Music-Hall', the title poem of the collection, the dramatic monologue is not only adopted as structural technique but is also a cardinal aspect of the content, since the protagonists are music-hall artists and their soliloquies coincide with their performances. The overall structure of the poem is based on a symmetrical framework: the introductory Prologue is balanced by the final Epilogue, and in-between the reader listens to the monologues of the six main characters -- each of them forming a separate metrical unit.¹¹⁴ Yet the cast of characters includes also the figure of a sort of chairman, who in the Prologue introduces the six artists to the

¹¹⁴ For this reason, I will give both the line and page number for each quotation.

reader, and in the Epilogue draws his own moral and delivers an ethical and philosophical lecture.

The realism of the whole picture is very convincing: once the anonymous narrator has introduced the various protagonists, whom he has met many times at the bar, he let them speak with their own voice, so that the situation bears a strong resemblance to Pirandello's drama, in which the stage manager at some points has to withdraw from the scene because the actors claim their right to exist there on the stage and 'live' their parts. To a certain extent, they can be considered 'six characters in search of an author' because their performance is also an experience of self-discovery and self-revelation, a quest after their own identity and the meaning of their existence. In fact, their search will not lead them to any epiphany. O'Connor has underlined the similarity between them and Joyce's *Dubliners*, in that they are all victims of spiritual paralysis (p. 65), but Davidson's 'artists' generally fail to grasp the truth and meaning of life even for one fleeting moment. Yet at least one character is visited by a moment of sudden revelation, that is, the narrator who introduced the artists, and, by introducing them, gave them a reason to be. We are confronting Davidson's ironic vision again: not the performers but the observer will eventually reach an understanding of himself, because observation entails distance and objectivity. The six music-hall artists or would-be artists enter to play their part and perform, but their script is the story of their lives, which also means that their public mask is often juxtaposed to their private experience. The play of private and public spheres varies according to the different characters; some of them are more identified with their parts than others; some, that is, are able to silence the voice of their subjectivity and plunge into their fictional role, whereas others find it more difficult to control and suppress their personal frustrations and anxiety.

The Prologue starts with a realistic detail which calls to mind the author's biography: 'In Glasgow, in 'Eighty-four,/ I worked as a junior clerk'.¹¹⁵ Davidson records here his experience in the Glasgow office of Clark's by means of economical and realistic language; he draws a photographic sketch of himself doing a tedious,

¹¹⁵ 'In a Music-Hall', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, I, pp. 21-28 (p. 21, l. 1).

repetitive job during the day, and releasing his piled-up frustrations and tensions in a music-hall during the night:

I did as my desk-fellows did;
 With a pipe and a tankard of beer,
 In a music-hall, rancid and hot,
 I lost my soul night after night. (p. 22, l. 13)

The narrator is another of Davidson's *personae*. This is especially corroborated by the presence of some maxim-like statements both in the Prologue and Epilogue; undoubtedly, the underlying thought belongs to the author. Here is an example: 'It is better to lose one's soul,/ Than never to stake it at all. (p. 22, l. 17). These extreme vision of human experiences and Ulysses-like urge to push oneself beyond the morally accepted and the conventional limits foreshadow the image of the exceptionally powerful and daring individual in Davidson's *Testaments* and later poems. Nevertheless, the previous lines still differ profoundly from the imperialistic and egocentric innuendoes of Davidson's later verse.

Unlike the narrator, each of the other characters is given a proper name, but they are not less afflicted by a sense of lost identity and their souls are likewise distressed by daily drudgery and insecurity. In this respect, it can be argued that Davidson has projected his inner dilemmas upon each of them. The first character to be introduced is Mary-Jane MacPherson, a music-hall singer whose disillusionment in love led her to change her life plans and to provide for her own financial support:

He thinks I'm a governess still,
 But I'm sure that he'll pardon my choice;
 I make more, and rest when I am ill,
 And it's only the sale of my voice. (p. 22, l. 1)

She is the mouthpiece of a reversed Christian dogmatism which reflects the contemporary myth of Mammon and material success, but in her heart she conceals a different hope and dream which she does not dare to name:

Time patiently weaves from his sands
 My life, a miraculous rope:
 I would sever the cord in his hands
 And die; but I hope, and I hope. (p. 23, l. 49)

Her repressed hope for love contrasts with the false Trinity of 'wealth, power, iniquity' (p. 22, l. 7); her curbed dream of a private conjugal life clashes with the demands of society which expects her to elect the world and wealth as gods. There is an overall irony in the description of this divided personality; apparently she is the victim of the Victorian worship of toil and materialism, yet if one takes gender into consideration, the whole perspective is totally reversed. By choosing to lead her life independently from her lover, she has acted against the Victorian angel-in-the-house paradigm. Nevertheless, her dream of love, although relegated to her subconscious, is still alive. Mary-Jane is one of 'the new women' whom Davidson addresses in a poem included in *Ballads and Songs*. Like them, she has opted for her own independence, but she also reflects the author's belief that 'Love and love alone,/ As simple as can be,/ Can make this life atone'.¹¹⁶

The second character's innermost feelings are more difficult to pin down. Tom Jenks is totally identified with his public mask, and never lets us intrude into his private sphere except for his superficial remark about his happy family life. He remains a flat character, absorbed in his part, and thus alienated from his audience and the reader. Yet just because of this full immersion in his performance, his jolliness might well be a mere façade, a pure exhibition, and the truth lying behind it unable to be grasped. The next artist, Lily Dale, is the vehicle for the *carpe diem* philosophy which Davidson embraced to an extent by rejecting the belief in an after-life. Among the music-hall

¹¹⁶ 'To the New Women', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, I, pp. 71-72 (l. 16).

entertainers, Lily sounds the most positive and undoubtedly she is endowed with a gift of self-irony and self-mockery which distinguishes her from her colleagues. In her case, private and public spheres mingle without provoking strong traumas, because she conceives life as a 'jest' (p. 24, l. 27), and can always find a playful answer to her personal exigencies. Her skill consists in her ability to break from the routine of her job, listen to her private voice and give it priority without hesitation:

But sometimes wild eyes will grow tame,
 And a voice have a tone -- ah, you men! --
 And a beard please me -- oh, there's my name!
 Well? I take a week's holiday then. (p. 25, l. 29)

Her strength is to be aware of her own limitations and admit them in public. She may have doubts herself, but the acceptance of her humanity saves her from the frustrations that harrow the other characters.

A tone shift occurs when Stanley Trafford, the fourth artist, enters the scene. His monologue is permeated by melancholy and regret for having yielded to life's material needs and given up his aspiration to become a poet. Contrary to Lily Dale, he lives with anguish the conflict between his dreams and reality, and cannot bridle his own feelings, which pour out in spite of the show he is supposed to perform. Even if only for a brief moment, his private self prevails on the public one:

Had I not sold my soul for bread!
 But what is this! I'm dull tonight;
 My heart has quite seduced my head;
 I'm talking poetry outright. (p. 25, l. 33)

He confesses that he works to earn his bread but that his heart is somewhere else. The trite word Antiszygy might in fact properly express his situation: he is victim of a constant unresolved battle between head and heart. Stanley Trafford's monologue is followed by the glamorous Selene Eden's singable speech. Her style attempts to

reproduce the rhythm of the dance she describes, and it gives rise to a series of synaesthetic effects:

I glide, I trip, I run, I spin,
 Lapped in the lime-light's aureole.
 Hushed are the voices, hushed the din,
 I see men's eyes like glowing coal.

My loosened scarf in odours drenched
 Showers keener hints of sensual bliss;
 The music swoons, the light is quenched,
 Into the dark I blow a kiss. (p. 26, l. 21)

And fling my feet above my head;
 The light grows, none aside may glance;
 Crimson and amber, green and red,
 In blinding baths of these I dance. (p. 27, l. 33)

This modern Salome personifies the sensual and physical aspects of Davidson's vision of life. She conveys also a sense of beauty and charm which bears resemblance to the contemporary aesthetic taste. Meaning and style reflect each other also in the final monologue. This time the speaker is a comedian who entertains the audience by means of his contorted movements, and his twists are reflected in his words:

I twist, contort, distort, and rage and rustle;
 I constrain my every limb and every muscle.
 I'm limber, I'm Antaeus,
 I chant the devil's paean,
 I dream, devise -- I travail, by the lord! (p. 27, l. 11)

The rhythm of his speech is different from that of the previous monologues, because the use of the rhyming couplets, compared to the ABAB scheme, speeds the tirade up, and has comic implications. Similarly to Mary-Jane MacPherson, Julian incarnates a topsy-turvy vision of life and a perspective of the world which is set in opposition to orthodox Christianity. 'My nature's a perennial somersault' (p. 27, l. 21) perfectly summarises his rejection of a monolithic and unswerving conception of life, which he replaces with a flexible vision open to change and encompassing contradictions:

'My nature's a perennial somersault',
 So you say, and so I think; but whose the fault?
 If I don't know good from evil,
 Is it wrong to be a devil?
 You don't get lime-juice cordial out of malt. (p. 27, l. 21)

The Epilogue is generally the place in which a moral is pointed or an afterthought expressed. Theoretically, Davidson's epilogue in this poem serves the same function, yet, ironically, it is the most obscure -- deliberately obscure -- and ambiguous part. The junior clerk acting as chairman in the prologue now takes the floor again, and, as in the beginning, his voice is juxtaposed with that of the author. The experience of the music-hall turns out to be a highly didactic and ethical lesson for the narrator. The significance of this experience is encapsulated in the concluding verses of the Epilogue:

There are six dreams I knew well;
 When I had sung them out,
 I recovered my soul that was lost. (p. 28, l. 11)

Listening to the artists' harangues meant being confronted with a kind of art which is mingled with real life. The quality of their artistic performance does not matter to the junior clerk, because his main concern is that their individual stories, told by themselves in a realistic context, triggered his creativity and allowed him to

immortalise them through writing. Now that he has 'sung them out', he feels a new enthusiasm and a kind of *joie de vivre*, despite his awareness that life is all a dream -- in James Thomson's words, 'a dream whose shapes return'.¹¹⁷ Even heaven and hell are our creations, our dreams, and, paradoxically, Davidson describes men as the visions of 'These dreamers below and above' (p. 28, l. 6), of the inhabitants of these phantasmagoric realms. Everything is therefore the dream of a dream, and love itself is defined as 'The dream of their dreams' (p. 28, l. 7), where 'their' refers to the dreamers. The whole passage has a *mise-en-abyme* effect and contains an enigmatic train of thought which does not come as a surprise in Davidson's writing. The ultimate meaning concerns the evaluation of reality and of the evanescence of life both through sheer observation and direct experience, which lead to a fuller understanding of ourselves and of our place in the universe.

In the character of Stanley Trafford, Davidson projected his own acceptance of hack work to support himself and his family. Even more than that, he projected the need to nullify himself and mute his voice at the beginning of his career, and bow to a society in which he would never feel integrated. Like Hogg before him, Davidson realised that society demanded him to conform and silence his eccentric, radical voice. Like Hogg, he responded by hiding himself behind a series of fictional characters whereby he could avoid self-exposure and, consequently, social censorship. The *personae* in his works represent a form of self-defence, but his eccentric voice never disappears completely; it continues to lurk behind those masks until it bursts out in the works composed in the late 1890s and at the turn of the century. But it is not only in the *Testaments* that Davidson's voice speaks out with vigour and self-confidence. Some of his earlier dramatic monologues and ballads are perhaps more successful examples of how he gradually developed his own style and came to terms with his eccentricity and otherness. This voice makes its first appearance in some of the ballads that I have analysed, such as 'The Ballad in Blank Verse', but it is certainly firmer and

¹¹⁷ *The City of Dreadful Night*, I. 15.

more distinct in some of the music-hall poems and in his urban poetry. 'Thirty Bob a Week' is, in this respect, a masterpiece.

T. S. Eliot acknowledged his indebtedness to Davidson as the author of this outstanding poem because it is undeniably different from any contemporary verse description -- both in Scotland and in England -- of urban life and people. The poem has a distinctive quality which sets it apart from any particular tradition. Like its author, it is eccentric and other, because, although it could be catalogued under the umbrella of urban poetry together with other Romantic and Victorian examples, it offers a style and language which have no canonical precursors. Yet this view is not shared by Turnbull, Davidson's editor, who indicates Kipling's poetry as a previous example of the use of a colloquial style in verse. Rather he sees Davidson's later poetry, in particular the *Testaments*, as more significantly looking forward to Eliot's and Pound's works.¹¹⁸

As a matter of fact, 'Thirty Bob a Week' deserves particular attention for other reasons than merely the adoption of a colloquial or prosaic diction. The most gripping aspect of the poem is its protagonist -- a striking amalgam of Wordsworth's peasants and Davidson's egotistical characters. His complexity derives from the fact that he is a simple clerk who, through self-analysis and inward reflection, becomes the spokesman of elaborate, at times Daedalian, philosophical ideas. In this he anticipates the inner tension of Eliot's *Prufrock*, and, to remain within Scottish literature, the antiszygical personality of MacDiarmid's *Drunk Man*.

The speaking 'I' introduces himself in a way which calls to mind the music-hall artist's performance: he addresses his audience directly in a half-humorous tone and through a language which is neither completely unpretentious nor too sophisticated. From the very beginning the clerk makes use of a complex and strongly connotative language; the meaning is never directly expressed but conveyed by means of rhetorical devices. The metaphors and similes become increasingly complex, because the clerk's monologue shifts from the description of his outer social position to that of his inner self. As O'Connor has pointed out, 'throughout the clerk fails to define his

¹¹⁸ Turnbull, 'Introduction', p. xxxii.

experience explicitly: he grasps for similes, for what the situation is *like* rather than what it *is*' (p. 68). There is a climax of metaphorical imagery culminating in the final assertive lines which lift the clerk's condition to a superior state of moral authority:

It's a naked child against a hungry wolf;
 It's playing bowls upon a splitting wreck;
 It's walking on a string across a gulf
 With millstones fore-and-aft about your neck;
 But the thing is daily done many and many a one;
 And we fall, face forward, fighting, on the deck.¹¹⁹

What comes before these unhesitatingly emphatic lines is the image of a much less self-possessed character. O'Connor identifies the central theme of the poem as 'the clerk's struggle to formulate his own experience in his state of semi-literacy', or as 'the literary and philosophical aspirations of a clerk' (p. 65). However valid these comments may be, the overall significance of the poem goes beyond the clerk's self-conscious attempt to assert his artistic inclination. By expressing his aspirations, he gives the reader access to his own subconscious life, and unveils his own intimate frustrations and tensions. The clerk seems to be speaking to a general audience, but at some point the addressee becomes identified with a specific, yet symbolically denominated, social figure: 'Mr Silver-tongue' (l. 31), who is the prototype of the middle-class or the intellectual élite in London.

Mr Silver-tongue is his antagonist both socially and intellectually, since he can 'touch a stop' (l. 1) -- afford leisure time -- whereas the clerk must relentlessly work in order to support his family. The anti-Kailyard picture of his wife who 'stitches towels for a hunks' (l. 20) echoes the description of the social underdog in contemporary realistic novels, such as Jack London's *The People of the Abyss* (1903). What helps him to face this unevenness between social statuses is his philosophical standpoint -- a view of life and society based on the idea of predestination, not

¹¹⁹ 'Thirty Bob a Week', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, I, pp. 63-65 (l. 91).

according to Calvinist religion but to the scientific idea of evolution and natural selection. The clerk's ethics appear to exhibit a pseudo-Darwinian theory of society whereby individuals occupy the position they deserve according to natural laws:

But I don't allow it's luck and all a toss;
 There's no such thing as being starred and crossed;
 It's just the power of some to be a boss,
 And the bally power of others to be bossed. (l. 7)

In other words, human existence is governed by unalterable scientific laws which, Davidson seems to suggest, empower every individual in some sense, even if their 'power' is to remain 'bossed'. Thus, in Davidson's outlook man is still, in Machiavellian terms, *faber fortunae suae*, although natural laws cannot be avoided and each individual must accept the social status determined by these laws. There is an undeniable contradiction at the core of this idea: how can man be the architect of his destiny and simultaneously the victim of an ineluctable universal plan?

Here is where Davidson, like James Thomson, invokes the notion of moral endurance and stoicism. Some men are bosses and others are bossed; this is an unflinching truth, but the poet, through the clerk's monologue, suggests that the very truth of human life consists of the ability to accept one's individual situation and 'feel that that's the proper thing for you' (l. 90). Wordsworth's leech-gatherer in 'Resolution and Independence' comes to mind, for he is likewise an ordinary individual expressing a highly philosophical conception of life. The leech-gatherer personifies the will to struggle and persevere despite existential adversities -- in his case symbolised by the increasing decay of the leeches:

'Once I could meet with them on every side;
 But they have dwindled long by slow decay;

Yet still I persevere, and find them where I may.¹²⁰

Davidson's clerk presents a more complex psychological condition, but in the end his self-assertiveness and belief in man's potentialities come to the fore. Finally, he finds the way to gain full self-esteem: human dignity primarily derives from persevering, from constant struggle rather than from actual achievement; thus man's most difficult task is not to win the battle but to endure the challenge and even failure and defeat day after day:

[...] the difficultest job a man can do,
Is to come it brave and meek with thirty bob a week,
And feel that that's the proper thing for you. (l. 88)

Men may fall, but their dignity will never truly be crushed, if they fall 'face forward, fighting, on the deck' (l. 96). John Sloan suggested that the central preoccupation of the poet is 'the problem of self-esteem for those who accept a Social Darwinian view of life'.¹²¹ A solution to this problem is provided by the notions of will and struggle which echo Schopenhauer's philosophical assumptions. In the eclogue 'Lammas', one of the characters says:

You are your birthright; let it serve you well:
Be your own star, for strength is from within,
And one against the world will always win!¹²²

According to Davidson, will belongs to the individual; every human being exists exclusively by his or her own volition -- an idea which Davidson did not see as

¹²⁰ William Wordsworth, 'Resolution and Independence', in *The Oxford Poetry Library. William Wordsworth*, ed. by Stephen Gill and Duncan Wu (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 126-130 (p. 129).

¹²¹ Sloan, *John Davidson: First of the Moderns*, p. 113.

¹²² 'Lammas', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, I, pp. 237-246 (l. 365).

opposed to the notion of social Darwinism and evolution which he expounds in 'Thirty Bob a Week':

No Adam was responsible for me,
 Nor society, nor systems, nary one:
 A little sleeping seed, I woke -- I did, indeed --
 A million years before the blooming sun.

I woke because I thought the time had come;
 Beyond my will there was no other cause;

[...]

And in whatever shape of mollusc or of ape
 I always went according to the laws. (ll. 69, 77)

Davidson's idea of struggle is dissociated from socialist thought and from revolutionary aims. He conceived life as an unarmed fight, as a form of resistance without resorting to politically subversive means. Unwittingly Davidson seems to have shared the ideas expressed in a passage from Thomas Lovell Beddoes's *Death's Jest Book* (1825-1848):

The look of the world's a lie, a face made up
 O'er graves and fiery depths, and nothing's true
 But what is horrible. -- If man could see .
 The perils and diseases that he elbows,
 Each day he walks a mile, which catch at him,
 Which fall behind and graze him as he passes;
 Then would he know that life's a single pilgrim,
 Fighting unarmed among a thousand soldiers.
 It is this infinite invisible
 Which we must learn to know, and yet to scorn,
 And, from the scorn of that, regard the world

As from the edge of a far star.¹²³

Davidson was essentially a reactionary in politics, although his works display a style and a philosophy which can hardly be pinned down to a particular tradition. Nonetheless, that he was not a socialist clearly emerges from the *Testaments*, in which he asserts the need for society to be guided by a powerful oligarchy.

The pseudo-Nietzschean theory of the god-like individual finds expression also in 'Thirty Bob a Week' through the figure of the Jekyll-Hyde protagonist. In fact, Davidson's clerk is not merely another version of the *Doppelgänger* motif. It is not so much his interior split between 'a god-almighty devil' (l. 44) and 'a sort of simpleton' (l. 50), as the process by which he detects them that bestows on this character a particular fascination. Like the protagonists of much modern drama, the clerk diagnoses himself, he is self-inquisitive and introspective, but, unlike Beckett's or Pinter's characters, he is then able to divulge his findings to his audience. His inward-looking did not lead to the discovery of an inexpressible spiritual void but of a psychological disruption. It is important that he can define his inner tension, and the means of achieving this are part of Davidson's frame of mind: he observes the two selves inhabiting his soul from a distance, almost pretending that there exists a third 'me' who can study his various psychological versions of himself. Self is like a supple mould which changes according to circumstances and situations. This idea of a stratified self is not far away from Luigi Pirandello's representation of the fragmentation of the ego in his plays and novels.

The whole description of the clerk's split personality is marked by an ironic turn and the use of reductive idiom. He devotes one stanza to each of his selves -- the 'god-almighty devil singing small' (l. 44), who would like to overpower the world, if he could, and the fool who is contented to live on thirty bob a week, although he is aware that 'the seas are deeper than tureens' (l. 55). In the following stanza he

¹²³ Thomas Beddoes, *Death's Jest-Book*, in *The Works of Thomas Lovell Beddoes*, ed. with an introduction by H. W. Donner (London: Oxford University Press; London: Humphrey Milford, 1935), pp. 323-498, 'gamma text', IV. 1. 7.

combines the two images by means of a humorous simile which produces a strong bathetic effect:

And the god-almighty devil and the fool
 That meet me in the High Street on the strike,
 When I walk about my heart a-gathering wool,
 Are my good and evil angels if you like.
 And both of them together in every kind of weather
 Ride me like a double-seated bike. (l. 56)

There is certainly a link between the clerk's antithetical instincts and the image of man as conveyed by Zarathustra: a tightrope-walker or a rope stretched between the ape and the superman. The metaphor expresses also the tension between submissiveness and assertiveness which Davidson perpetually experienced in London, confronted with a reality which obliged him to accept what was available for him at that moment, and yet, in Oscar Wilde's words, always 'looking at the stars'.¹²⁴

iii. Urban poems

Davidson's urban poetry is marked by a variety of motifs ranging from the Wordsworthian perception of the beauty of the city in 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802' to the squalid representation of Victorian urbanisation in writers such as Buchanan, Henley, and, of course, Thomson. It would be probably more appropriate to say that Davidson's description of urban civilisation is, like many other aspects of his work, constantly dual, since his response to the urban world varies according to his stance within it, to the intensity of his otherness and eccentricity from it. In this, he resembles Carlyle, in particular the Carlyle who in *Sartor Resartus* presented the image of a society devastated by materialism, yet still

¹²⁴ Oscar Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan. A Play About a Good Woman*, 3rd edn (London: Methuen & Co., 1909), III, p. 110.

concealing within it the seeds of the regeneration which the poet-hero would bring about. But Davidson also echoes Smith and Geddes, who likewise could not make up their mind as to whether the landscape of the city contained any kind of beauty.

Davidson had a love-hate relationship with the town where he secured his own literary career but simultaneously felt marginalised and alienated. In his early work *Diabolus Amans. A Dramatic Poem* (1885), London is depicted as an inspiring place, and a similar idealisation of the city as a cultural melting pot, where all aspirations could be realised, is to be found in most of his early works -- in the play *Smith* (1888) the city represents a place of high promises and potential achievements. These works were produced before Davidson left for London; thus the image of the city which he depicted in both of them was the product of his imagination, removed from the actual context of the city. This positive evaluation of certain aspects of the city also appears in some of his early poems included in *In a Music-Hall and other Poems*, and *Ballads and Songs*, as well as in Davidson's 'eclogues', which were collected in two volumes: *Fleet Street Eclogues* (1893) and *A Second Series of Fleet Street Eclogues* (1896). The titles are self-explanatory; though generally maintaining the prosody of the conventional eclogue, Davidson produces an ironic inversion of the pastoral tradition by moving the focus from the country to the city.

However, 'Nocturne' (*In a Music-Hall*) is one of Davidson's most explicit post-Romantic claims for rural beauty as opposed to urban paraphernalia; it is thus closer to Wordsworth's 'London' than to 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge'. The poem opens with an image which T. S. Eliot might have catalogued with 'Thirty Bob a Week' as modernist *ante-litteram*:

The wind is astir in the town;
It wanders the street like a ghost
In a catacomb's labyrinth lost,
Seeking a path to the heath.¹²⁵

¹²⁵ 'Nocturne', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, I, pp. 46-47 (l. 1).

Yet the central opposition between present and past, contingent reality and life revived by memory strikes a Romantic chord, reaching a climax in the very last line: 'Memories dearer than hope' (l. 20). This sentimental and introspective lyric is unusual for a poet who absorbed the language of science and transported it into the medium of poetry, who avoided self-involvement and confessional attitudes by resorting to irony and personation. On the other hand, it is not totally unusual if one considers the strong subjective component which characterises Davidson's later verse, loaded with didactic and metaphysical concerns. Undoubtedly, it is evidence of the versatility and diversity of Davidson's styles and themes.

The conflict between past and present, colourful memories and grey actuality is also at the centre of *Fleet Street Eclogues* (First series, 1893 and Second series, 1896).¹²⁶ The necessity to keep the present analysis within a limited scope prevents a fully satisfactory discussion of Davidson's eclogues. Accepting these limits, I will focus on the eccentricity of the characters he presents and of the form of his eclogues. In an interview in the *Bookman* Davidson explained why he associated the pastoral genre with the urban world of hack journalists, thus giving rise to an ironic subversion of the pastoral convention:

When I was a teacher in Scotland, I had the idea of writing a kind of teacher's calendar on the plan of the old Shepherd's Calendar, but this idea was never carried out. When my father died, however, among the books that came into my possession was a copy of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*. As I read it the old idea revived, but I was in London now, and the journalists of Fleet-street seemed closer friends than the teachers of my young days. So I wrote a journalist's calendar, under the title of *Fleet-street Eclogues*, and

¹²⁶ Davidson returned to the Fleet street eclogue also in 1905, but this time his central, almost unique, concern was scientific materialism rather than a balanced treatment of urban and rural themes.

every morning, before sitting down to my desk, I read a chapter of Gibbon.¹²⁷

What links the eclogues together and moulds them into a kind of framework is the calendar structure -- each eclogue is given the name of a traditional English holiday -- and the recurrence of the same characters in the various dialogues, which together form 'an ironic interplay of multiple voices'.¹²⁸ The dramatic form allowed Davidson to deal with a particular subject from different viewpoints. The reader can therefore hear each character's opinion about urban and country life, about their job or contemporary issues, and, through a sort of modern flyting, the poet manages to express the contradictory, paradoxical nature of life, which constitutes one of the axiomatic principles of his thought. Hence Davidson stands behind each shepherd-journalist and behind all of them simultaneously; as Townsend has revealingly pointed out, 'together they represent a composite world outlook which their creator sought to encompass in his personality and poetry' (p. 206).

Each of them is idiosyncratically eccentric, in that they are ex-shepherds who respond individually to the urban context, either evoking nostalgically the lost rural Eden or facing the new reality with a detached cynical attitude. What they all share is the condition of the outcast, exemplified by the 'Vale of Hinmom' in 'Epilogue to Fleet Street Eclogues', which bears a strong resemblance to Thomson's 'City of Dreadful Night', similarly inhabited by worn-out individuals.¹²⁹ Thomson is echoed particularly at the end of the eclogue, where Davidson voices his conception of moral endurance through Votary's words:

What matters Hinmon for an hour or two?
Arise and let us sing; and, singing build

¹²⁷ Quoted in O'Connor, p. 73.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 75.

¹²⁹ This poem was written later than the other eclogues, and appeared in *The Saturday Review*, 26 November 1898, p. 696 (see Turnbull, note 154, p. 508).

A tabernacle even with these ghastly bones.¹³⁰

Strikingly similar are Thomson's stoical lines in Section XIX of *The City of Dreadful Night*: '[...] it is but for one night after all:/ What matters one brief night of dreary pain?' (ll. 29-30). Likewise, in 'St Swithin's Day' (*Fleet Street Eclogues*, 1893) Thomson's city is recalled by the image of the swains choked by the heat and aridity of the town. This is how Brian describes himself and his companions: 'And now the Dog Days bake us in our rooms/ Like heretics in Dis's lidded tombs'.¹³¹ London is a waste land, 'the devil's din' (l. 120), in Basil's words, where men are reduced to 'beasts of burden' (l. 127) who work only 'to please a thankless upper ten' (l. 128). To this image of gloom and inhumanity Basil opposes that of 'the green-crowned, sun-fronting mountain-brow' (l. 108) where he could live 'the Heaven and Hades of delight' (l. 115).

Echoes of Baudelaire's leaden skies and spleen, and a prefiguration of T. S. Eliot's and Beckett's images of paralysed life, recur in various urban scenes throughout the eclogues. In 'Queen Elizabeth's Day' Basil describes the air in London as a 'heavy-laden silent atmosphere',¹³² while Menzies in 'St George's Day' sees Time as 'a dungeon vast/ Where Life lies rotting in the straw'.¹³³ The characters are all victims of alienation of different sorts. 'Lammas' is perhaps the eclogue which most significantly conveys the idea that alienation does not merely affect urban life but can also characterise the relationship between men and nature, when men try to find an answer to their metaphysical problems in nature. Herbert explains to Ninian that his expectation of a manifestation of divinity through the beauty of nature is only a pathetic fallacy -- thus echoing James Thomson's poem again where the poet describes man's failure to communicate with the firmament (section XVII). One of the pivotal scenes in 'Lammas' concerns Ninian's tale about his appalling experience on Arthur's Seat -- a spot associated with metaphysical or supernatural episodes in various

¹³⁰ 'Epilogue to Fleet Street Eclogues', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, I, pp. 249-254 (p. 254), ll. 216--218.

¹³¹ 'St Swithin's Day', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, I, pp. 205-208 (l. 2).

¹³² 'Queen Elizabeth's Day', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, I, pp. 214-219 (l. 9).

¹³³ 'St. George's Day', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, I, pp. 222-229 (l. 93).

Scottish texts. In front of a sublime and, simultaneously, frightening landscape, Ninian reports to Herbert the consequences of the incident:

Masses of vision overwhelm me thus:
 I am haunted by the heavens and the earth --
 Darkness and light; and when I am addressed
 I answer from the point, or petulantly,
 Or say the opposite of what I would,
 And am most awkward, helpless, and forlorn,
 Wherefore I shun the company of men,
 Not fearing them, but fearful of myself;
 Surely to strive to please and still to fail
 Is to be wretched in the last degree. (l. 117)

Ninian confesses that his metaphysical search and yearning were provoked by his father's insisting that the Truth is revealed in the holy texts. Contrary to his father, he expected the revelation to become real, and therefore he visited mountains and sea in order to receive a sign from God. Ninian's account is obviously autobiographical; Davidson used to wander alone on Arthur's Seat, and, like Ninian, he finally gave up looking for an answer and 'found content/ In roaming' (l. 246), in the search itself, until scientific materialism offered him a new escape. As a matter of fact, Herbert is here the mouthpiece for Davidson's early adherence to the materialistic creed when he says to Ninian:

So let us think we are the tortured nerves
 Of Being in travail with a higher type.
 I know that I shall crumble back to dust,
 And cease for evermore from the sense and thought,
 But this contents me well in my distress: --
 I, being human, touch the highest reach
 Attained by matter, and within me feel

The motion of a loftier than I:

Out of the beast came man; from man comes God. (l. 408)

The city-versus-country paradigm impinges upon the 1893 and 1896 series of eclogues, whereas it becomes minor or absent in the eclogues written after 1905. In the eclogues of the 1890s, the country life that the journalists have left behind represents a sort of lost Utopia opposed to the claustrophobic existence in the city. Yet the two worlds are presented together by the various dramatic voices; their dialogues are inclusive in that they encompass a world outlook based on the coexistence of oppositions as well as on their mutual dependence. This juxtaposition of conflicting views is reflected by the eccentric use of diverse rhythms and forms.

Indeed one of the most eccentric features of Davidson's eclogues is their multifarious range of musical and poetic forms: madrigals, fugues and sonorous rhythms alternate with a more prosaic diction. The beginning of 'Michaelmas' (*Fleet Street Eclogues*, 1893) provides a significant example of these stylistic shifts:

Herbert: The farmer roasts his stubble goose.

Menzies: The pard and tiger moths are loose.

Sandy: The broom-pods crackle in the sun;
And since the flowers are nearly done,
From thymy slopes and heather hills,
The wearied bee his pocket fills.

Brian: The wearied bee!

Herbert: On ancient walls
The moss turns greener.

Sandy: Hark! St Paul's
Booms midnight.

Brian: Basil is asleep.

Sandy: Boom, iron tongue! boom, slow and deep!

Menzies: The berries on the hawthorn tree

Are red as blood.¹³⁴

Six rhyming couplets characterised by a regular rhythm are followed by verses of various length; the language is poetic throughout, in some cases even archaic as in 'pard' or 'hark', although the subject is down-to-earth and the verses are purely descriptive -- a celebration of good weather and the blooming season.

If one looks at the eclogues as a whole, they give the impression of a symphony in which certain themes recur to form a specific set of leit-motifs. Most repeated are the theme of a past age -- Davidson's version of the Golden Age -- which contrasts with the present, the related motif of boyhood memories and the ambivalent relationship with past traditions and parental religion, and finally the all-embracing view that life is a medley of contraries, and therefore all kinds of polarities -- including the ubiquitous city -versus-country motif -- must necessarily coexist. In regard to this aspect, Mary O'Connor has called attention to the heterogeneity of some of Davidson's rural scenes, such as the following one:

And scent the spicy smoke
Of withered weeds that burn where gardens be;
And in a ditch perhaps a primrose see.¹³⁵

In 'St Valentine's Eve' (*Fleet Street Eclogues*, 1893), Percy, one of the main characters, suggests that good can come out of evil by telling the story of the old journalist 'who out of evil could distil the good' (l. 80). The journalist's philosophical view of the world's evil acts as his own safeguard against pessimism and despair:

I think that all the horrors ever told
Of tonsured men and women sable-stoled,

¹³⁴ 'Michaelmas', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, I, pp. 209-214 (l. 1).

¹³⁵ Quoted in O'Connor, p. 79.

[...] all the blight
 Of pain, age, madness, ravished innocence,
 Despair and impotence,
 The lofty anguish that affronts the light,
 And seems to fill the past with utter night,

‘Is but Love’s needful shadow: though the poles,
 The spangled zodiac, and the stars that beat
 In heaven’s high Watling Street
 Their myriad rounds; though every orb that rolls
 Lighting or lit, were filled with tortured souls,

‘If one man and one woman. heart and brain
 Entranced above all fear, above all doubt
 Might wring their essence out
 The groaning of a universe in pain
 Were as an undersong in Love’s refrain. (l. 110)

The idea that some form of good can derive from evil -- or perhaps what is conventionally seen as evil -- helps indirectly to explain Davidson’s exaltation of the Empire, and its degeneration into jingoism. ‘St. George’s Day’ anticipates the more expressly imperialistic views of his later poems. Herbert and Basil are the main spokesmen of fanatical patriotism, of what Menzies calls ‘patriotic craze’ (l. 227). Yet the most interesting aspect of the imperialist theme is the underlying problem of identity, which derives from a nation’s absorption of other countries. The whole issue is tackled by the poet with irony and self-irony, since the problem of identity touched Davidson perhaps more dramatically than any imperialist leader.

Menzies introduces this problem by saying that ‘there is no England now’ (l. 101), since

Cockney and Celt and Scot are here,

And Democrats and 'ans' and 'ists'
 In clubs and cliques and divers lists;
 But now we have no Englishmen. (l. 103)

and, moreover, because

We lie widespread, the dragon-prey
 Of any Cappadocian thief.
 In Arctic and Pacific seas
 We lounge and loaf: and either pole
 We reach with sprawling colonies --
 Unwieldy limbs that lack a soul. (l. 155)

In other words, what Menzies suggests is that the geographical and cultural characteristics of England have profoundly changed as a consequence of imperialistic expansion, and, therefore, even the concept of English nationhood must be reformulated in accordance with the new multicultural configuration of the country. The metaphor of the body lacking a soul is particularly interesting in a post-colonial perspective. The soul stands for the centre; the body formed by 'unwieldy limbs' is an image of the British empire, similar to a tree branching out randomly in every direction. But if the centre is lacking then the periphery cannot be defined, and if 'peripheral' means etymologically 'powerless',¹³⁶ then the whole question of power and the wielding of power, of dominant and minority cultures, must be revised. All this is only hinted by Menzies, yet still it is highly significant that in the 1890s Davidson's assessment of imperialism was extremely problematic: as a Scottish exile, displaced and ex-centric from both Scotland and England, he may then have embraced the idea of the absent centre as a solution to his own identity conflicts.

On the other hand, Davidson had already begun to perceive another solution, which is expressed more assertively in the *Testaments*. In 'A Ballad in Blank Verse'

¹³⁶ See Susan Castillo, *Notes from the Periphery. Marginality in North American Literature and Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), p. 4.

Scotland is generically called 'the North', thus hinting that the poet is thinking in terms of Britishness, and considering Scotland as part of a wider country. In 'St George's Day' this thought is pushed further, and the underlying sense of Britishness is replaced with that of Englishness. 'English' is used by Basil as a blanket term, so that Bruce and Wallace are called 'mighty northern Englishmen' (l. 146), and he indicates that the unifying principle -- the 'mighty soul' (l. 165) -- of the empire is 'the soul of English speech and thought' (l. 166). The 'Word' rather than the 'sword' (l. 221) of England is described by Basil as the means of conquering the world. He thinks that the English language is the most powerful colonising force -- certainly it was according to MacDiarmid too, who regretted the fact that Davidson did not realise 'the far greater suitability of Scots for the expression of his ideas than English could ever afford'.¹³⁷

In the 1893 and 1896 eclogues the jingoistic theme is one of the subjects on which the characters dwell, but it does not correspond to one of Davidson's central concerns. He was then more interested in conveying his ironic world outlook by means of a heterogeneous, at times cacophonous, combination of voices and styles. He intended to suggest that man personifies the coexistence of contradictions and polarities which characterises the universe. The 1905 eclogues are totally different because the poet's vision is now based on the unifying principles of materialism. O'Connor points out the shift from the first to the second kind of eclogues thus:

By 1905 Davidson's materialist concerns reinforced the earlier emphasis on this tie with nature, but in contrast, accentuated unity rather than diversity, singleness of vision rather than an ongoing debate. He turned finally to testament and tragedy to embody these materialist concerns (p. 93).

¹³⁷ MacDiarmid, 'John Davidson. Influences and Influence', p. 47.

In the volume *Ballads and Songs* (1894) three urban poems stand out particularly, each offering a different picture of the urban world. 'A Loafer' is a dramatic monologue in rhyming iambic tetrameters and trimeters about a city tramp and his estrangement from the other citizens, who appear to him shallow, just 'eyes and cheeks that glow'.¹³⁸ His otherness from the urban crowd is established by class division: they are 'pleasant people' (l. 15), they enjoy their 'lustrous health' (l. 28) whereas he is a raggy Rambler with the worn-out look of one of Edward Munch's ghost-like figures. He passes unnoticed among them since they 'recognise/ No brother' in his 'rags and woe' (l. 29). He portrays himself with striking realism and a rhetorical language which links him with nature, thus emphasising his alienation from the place and people around him:

About my face like seaweed droops
My tangled beard, my tangled hair;
From cavernous and shaggy brows
My stony eyes untroubled stare. (l. 9)

Yet the poem is not merely about the loafer's wretched existence amidst an indifferent town. The pivotal theme is the protagonist's ability to preserve a sense of dignity despite his misfortune, and the means to which he resorts is a stoical acceptance of his lot and endurance, which he shares with Davidson's typical heroic anti-heroes: 'With placid breath on pain and death,/ My certain alms, alone I wait' (l. 35). 'Alone' is obviously stressed because for Davidson men are alone in front of destiny, although alone they can also overpower fate by believing in their individual moral strength -- like the loafer. Hence Davidson has his *persona* say: 'I know no handicraft, no art,/ But I have conquered fate' (l. 31).

This monologue prefigures later poems in which Davidson's anti-Christian and materialistic beliefs reach a climactic expression. By writing that 'drowned folks lie/ In sepulchres no tempest stirs/ And only eyeless things pass by' (l. 21), he alludes to

¹³⁸ 'A Loafer', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, I, pp. 80-81 (l. 26).

the non-existence of an after-life, and to utter oblivion following death. No vision of an alluring and rewarding Heaven visits him, but only the hallucination -- or is it real? -- of a 'ghostly shout', (l. 6) a 'ghostly cry' (l. 20) and a 'pale, unechoing note' (l. 37). It comes from behind the clouds, but neither from 'ruddy throat/ Of human breed' nor from 'seraph's seed' (l. 40), and, not surprisingly, it is ambiguous and resistant to straightforward interpretation. 'The faint "Aha!" sent from the wall/ Of heaven' (l. 40) could indicate either triumph or mockery, but who exactly pronounces it? Is it destiny mocking the 'sea-whelmed', 'drowned folks' (l. 22) whom the protagonist sympathises with? Or is it the communal cry of the underdog united by a common cause: to struggle through existence and never yield? Even though it is the voice of universal pain -- a Leopardian motif -- it bespeaks also the underdog's triumph over the adversities of destiny. The word 'heaven' used in a non-religious context gives rise to an apparent paradox. The loafer denies immortality of the soul and then refers to the 'wall of heaven'. But the image is an eccentric one, referring to a kind of 'heaven on earth' inhabited by outcasts like the poet -- and the loafer -- 'afar, aloft' (l. 6), scattered in all cities of the world, yet still audible and present to his mind. This second reading is undoubtedly more in tune with Davidson's *Weltanschauung*.

The poem entitled 'London' strikes a different chord. Like Wordsworth's 'On Westminster Bridge', it suggests that the city sometimes rewards the acute observer with picturesque views. The description of St. Paul's dome standing out against the sky is made with impressionistic touch. On the other hand, the poem seems to be the product of the poet's well-disposed attitude towards the surrounding environment, hence an expressionist, rather than impressionist, vision of the city. The urban scenery metamorphoses under his eyes into a quasi-idyllic world, so that it produces an effect totally opposite to the that of the urban wasteland in 'Nocturne'. Unusually even the throbbing city life is an image of warmth and pleasurable activism. Like James Thomson in poems such as 'Sunday Up the River. An Idyll' and 'Sunday at Hampstead', Davidson had his lighter moments.

Finally, a third urban picture appears in 'Song of a Train'. It is a futuristic song about the miracles of technological progress, entirely constructed on a generous

use of onomatopoeic words and a slightly pompous language, which throws suspicion on the sincerity of the author. The poem's structure and rhythm are remarkable. The word 'train' is never used except in the final line, where it forms an isolated iamb: 'The train'.¹³⁹ All the lines are short, mostly iambic dimeters or trimeters, thus conveying the idea of swiftiness. The train is anthropomorphised into a monster -- though always referred to as 'it' -- outrunning the sun, dying and being born again every time it enters and leaves a tunnel. 'The whole round world/ Is a warren of railway tunnels' (l. 38), writes the poet. In other words, the course of the train is a metaphor of the cyclical recurrence of life and death in nature -- an idea which Davidson developed later on and merged with his materialistic creed. The image of the 'monster machine' links Davidson's poem with Alexander Anderson's 'The Engine' and James Young Geddes's 'Man and the Engine'. The parallel with the former is particularly strong, because in both poems the epithet 'monster' does not have a pejorative connotation but indicates the supernatural power of the engine. There may be an ironic element in Davidson's description, but the image of the train defying Time and travelling faster than the sun is undoubtedly a symbol of unquenchable power, and thus already a metaphor of the *Übermensch*.

The collection *New Ballads* (1897) includes an exquisite song in which the urban theme and the poet's aloofness revolve around the central image of a flower, an eccentric presence amidst the urban turmoil. 'A Highway Pimpernel' stands out in the volume thanks to its singable rhythm and the effective use of the beautiful metaphor of the pimpernel which closes its petal as soon as the weather turns cloudy and wet, whereas in the highway the traffic of people and carts continues as busy as ever. Interestingly the pimpernel hangs 'On the edge of the rut the cart-wheels chafe'.¹⁴⁰ Its position is marginal, and yet it somehow is part of the urban scene; Davidson himself similarly lived a private and isolated life in London, although he was aware of what was going on in the public arena and observed everything from a distance.

¹³⁹ 'Song of a Train', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, I, pp. 60-61 (l. 50).

¹⁴⁰ 'A Highway Pimpernel', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, I, pp. 98-99 (l. 8).

In another poem in the same volume, Davidson displays a more sympathetic concern for the plight of the poor. I refer to 'A Northern Suburb', which is very close, in theme and tone, to James Thomson's poems about the problems of urban society. Davidson's denunciation of suburban life is obvious in these lines:

With shelves for rooms the houses crowd,
 Like draughty cupboards in a row --
 Ice-chests when wintry winds are loud,
 Ovens when summer breezes blow.¹⁴¹

In later poems, London assumes various connotations, but in general Davidson's relationship with it remains one of ambiguous love and hate. 'The Wastrel', which first appeared in *The Pall-Mall Gazette* of 30 May 1903, focuses on the theme of exile as escape from family boundaries and cultural constraints. It is constructed on a double mirror-technique: a relentless minister preaches the story of 'the wastrel and the father that he vexed';¹⁴² indirectly he is telling the story of his own son -- present among the congregation -- and of his sinful decision to leave his family and go to London in order 'To make a fortune' (l. 21). The son is clearly the mirror image of Davidson himself. In this case, the city represents escape and freedom, as the final lines of the poem suggest: 'Oho, for London Town again, where folk in peace can die,/ And the thunder-and-lightning devil of a train that takes me there!' (l. 29). The language is deliberately blasphemous and targeted against the preacher, who 'Of little but his Bible and his creed [...] knew' (l. 11), and whose emotions 'dogma like a razor [...] had unsexed' (l. 12). In the same year another poem appeared in *The Pall-Mall Magazine*. It acts as a sort of reverse of the coin to 'The Wastrel'. As in *The City of Dreadful Night*, London is not directly named this time, but the identification of 'the turbulent City of Death', 'the City of Dis',¹⁴³ with the British capital is one of the possible interpretation of 'At the Door'. This poem is permeated with echoes of

¹⁴¹ 'A Northern Suburb', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, I, p. 109 (l. 13).

¹⁴² 'The Wastrel', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, I, p. 153 (l. 10).

¹⁴³ 'At the Door', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, I, pp. 153-154 (ll. 6, 10).

Thomson's masterpiece, and, like its predecessor, encompasses a sub-text of satirical attacks against the infernal aspects of the modern city:

At the end of the world far down,
 Obscure in the dark abyss,
 Like a planet of baleful renown,
 Glimmers the City of Dis:
 As pulses that flicker the dim windows beat,
 For the fog overflows every street. (l. 7)

The dehumanising effects of industrialisation are also denounced in the poem entitled 'The World's Failure' (1904).¹⁴⁴ On the surface, the poet presents us with another instance of the dichotomy between country and city, which is emphasised by the use of a spatial opposition between 'somewhere' -- distant and longed-for -- and 'here' -- actual and loathsome:

Somewhere delighted larks, forestalling day,
 Ascend and garland heaven with flower and fruit,
 Enwreath and overrun the shining air

[...] but here the iron heavens
 Ring to the factory-whistle, here the dawn,
 All overgrown and quenched in creeping smoke,
 Decays unseen [...] ¹⁴⁵

In fact, the ultimate meaning of the poem goes beyond the conventional oppositional pair, and embraces a wider view of the earth and its inherent contradictions. Ultimately, the poet seems to suggest, although the earth is 'the torture-chamber of

¹⁴⁴ Included in *Wayfarer's Love: contributions from living poets*, ed. by Duchess of Sutherland (London, 1904), pp. 70-1.

¹⁴⁵ 'The World's Failure', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, I, pp. 154-155 (ll. 6, 11)

the universe' (l. 27) -- a magnification of the imprisoned life in the city -- it still contains lighter spots: the nightingale will continue to sing 'enraptured' (l. 36) throughout the night, and some individuals will continue to feel wonder in front of the mysteries of nature:

[...] and here a boy and girl will watch
The pallid moon with earnest looks and eyes
Of infinite appeal! [...] (l. 37)

Ultimately, then, an ironic element underlies the title of the poem.

Like Thomson, Davidson often felt that living in the city was like living within a labyrinth under leaden heavens. The choking sensation caused by the city's claustrophobia and pollution recurs in many poems. 'In the City' (*The Monthly Review*, April 1905) and 'The Thames Embankment' (*The Westminster Gazette*, December 1908) are two representative examples, both dealing with the contradictory aspects which characterise the city, and, accordingly, with the poet's dual vision. Whereas the former indicates that no natural phenomenon will ever be able to quash the day's 'London doom of smoke',¹⁴⁶ in the latter poem the balance is reversed, because the rising of the sun produces 'extravagantly beautiful'¹⁴⁷ effects on the urban landscape. The 'doom of smoke' is the pivotal image in 'In the City'. It chokes even nature's outbursts:

When their march and song grow mute
In the city's labyrinth trapped,
The storms themselves are wrapped
In draggled shrouds of soot. (l. 9)

On the other hand, the protagonist of 'The Thames Embankment' is the sun; under its effects the city undergoes a metamorphosis, and simultaneously the poem, after the

¹⁴⁶ 'In the City', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, I, pp. 157-158 (l. 6).

¹⁴⁷ 'The Thames Embankment', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, I, pp. 179-181 (l. 22).

initial stanza describing industrial bric-à-brac and refuse, turns into a Romantic vision of the physical surroundings, loaded with metaphysical overtones. Hence the concluding lines:

The potent sunbeams, that had fished the whole
 Enormous mass of moisture from the sea,
 Kneaded, divided and divided, wrought
 And turned it to a thousand fantasies
 Upon the ancient potter's wheel, the earth. (l. 94)

iv. The *Testaments* and last poems

John Davidson's later poems are difficult to assess. The present study cannot totally pass them over, because they are the expression of the convictions and ideas that the author especially intended to pass on to posterity. Moreover, as Turnbull suggests, they foreshadow later developments in poetry: the bringing into poetry of scientific discoveries and the use of a 'highly distinctive' blank verse.¹⁴⁸ Davidson's moral and linguistic eccentricity is ubiquitous in the *Testaments*, which, in this respect, significantly anticipate MacDiarmid's interdisciplinary and all-embracing writing. On the other hand, I share Holbrook Jackson's view that Davidson's best poetic achievement belongs to the earlier phase of lyrical poems, ballads and music-hall verse:

In the Eighteen Nineties John Davidson strove always for the utterance of such feelings and ideas as absorbed his mind during the last years; but in the earlier period he was less conscious of definite aim, and his best work took the form of poetry and the place of great poetry. His ballads and eclogues, a few of his lyrics and

passages in his poetic tragedies are already graven on the scroll of immortal verse.¹⁴⁹

The lack, or unconsciousness of 'definite aim', is the aspect that crucially differentiates Davidson's pre-*Testaments* phase -- which ends about 1900 -- from his last works. Even though some of the essential themes and characters of these later poems are anticipated in earlier ballads and lyrics, it is only in the *Testaments* and in such poems as 'The Crystal Palace' that Davidson's deepest convictions are moulded into a clear philosophical and scientific shape. In previous poems, the universe is represented as an infinity of oppositions and dilemmas that the poet does not attempt to solve or explain but accepts as manifestation of the essence of life. In his later poems, the search for an answer, for an original cause that could fill in the void left by his abjuration of the Christian dogma becomes a priority. Hence his more defined purpose, as he explains in a letter to William Archer:

My purpose in these Testaments is to aid the rotten overthrow of the rotten financial investment called Christendom: I perceive that this can only be done by purging the world of everything that is meant by spirit, soul, 'other' world, though all the literature and art and religion of the past should go with it. I would start the world over again from the only mystery, Matter.¹⁵⁰

In other words, though remaining 'other' from official religion, in the *Testaments* Davidson's moral ex-centricity is superseded by the conception of a scientific principle which superintends the whole universe, and which he identifies with Matter. His ideas were substantiated by the contemporary scientific theories of the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel, author of *The Riddle of the Universe* (1901) and *The Wonders of Life*

¹⁴⁸ Turnbull, 'Introduction', p. xxx.

¹⁴⁹ Jackson, 'John Davidson', p. 191.

¹⁵⁰ Sloan, *John Davidson: First of the Moderns*, p. 214.

(1904), whose ether theory and attack on the Christian dualism of spirit and matter were a strong influence on the poet.¹⁵¹

Before the *Testaments*, Davidson's *Weltanschauung* imbibed two main notions: contradiction and irony. In and after the *Testaments*, his vision, although continuing to encompass contradictory phenomena, is characterised by the central unity of spirit and matter, by the identification of man with the universe, and thought with ether by means of their sole constitutive substance: matter. In short, in his last years Davidson conceived a form of monism whereby the visible and invisible coalesce, since '[...] there is no Other World [...] the whole universe consists of the same Matter as man [...] Man is matter; mind and soul are material forces [...]'.¹⁵² Matter is the new truth and mystery which Davidson proposes in replacement of orthodox creeds and -- in his view -- obsolete and false notions of divinity. The irony is that he rejects ideologies and dogmas by propounding his own scientific theory. In the play *The Theatrocrat* (1905), which is Davidson's stage version of his new ideas, he even proposes a new Trinity:

The idea of the Trinity, for example, is clearly the effort of the Universe become conscious in man to express that visible and invisible being and that power, namely, Ether, Matter, Energy, which we now know to be the triple form of the Universe [...]. (pp. 74-75)

Critics offer different, at times bewildering, interpretations of Davidson's monistic vision. Ritchie Robertson sees it as a version of Schopenhauer's 'metaphysical monism', whereas A. S. Mories perceives in it an element of mysticism, since 'what he glorifies as man's conscious identification of himself with "the Universe" is but a colder form of expressing the great self-surrender of the mystics -- their submersion in

¹⁵¹ For information about the literary and theoretical influences on John Davidson see Sloan, *John Davidson: First of the Moderns*, pp. 199, 214.

¹⁵² *The Theatrocrat*, pp. 35-36.

the thought and spirit of the Eternal [...]'.¹⁵³ On the other hand, O'Connor very significantly underlines the contradictory quality of this apparently unified system. Matter is the underlying principle but its essential nature is characterised by 'a movement between flux, instability and tension on the one hand, and contraction, formation, and stability on the other' (p. 95).

In short, Davidson envisages a kind of Blakean Energy deriving from Matter which gives rise to the same pulsations in man and nature. According to this view, there would be no substantial difference between man and the beast, if man were not endowed with the capacity to feel and understand, or if man were not matter become conscious and self-conscious. Consequently, like Leopardi before him, Davidson admits that all living beings suffer, yet man is also conscious of his own suffering as well as of that he inflicts -- this is one of the central themes in *The Testament of a Vivisector* (1901).¹⁵⁴ The poet suggests that pain is pervasive in the universe, and he proves this axiom by borrowing the language and principles of science, in order to show both that modern poetry cannot be separated from science and that men must refute the ideological abstractions and constructions of religion and politics. Conversely, science can provide them with an answer to their Faustian and Frankenstein-like lust for knowledge. The language of science was already in use for literary purposes centuries before him, but Davidson does not confine himself to the mere adoption of a specific jargon. His commitment to science is total, in that it goes beyond the level of language to embrace his deepest philosophic and moral views. In *The Speaker*, he once wrote that 'in our time Science is going to embrace, has already flung its arm about, Literature'.¹⁵⁵

Nonetheless, when one reads the *Testaments*, something immediately catches the eye. The adoption of a scientific, prosaic diction is mingled with a spectrum of poetic styles and modes which ranges from the epic to the visionary and fantastic. In

¹⁵³ Ritchie Robertson, 'Science and Myth in John Davidson's *Testaments*', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 17 (1983), 85-109 (p. 87); A. S. Mories, 'The Religious Significance of John Davidson', *The Westminster Review*, 180 (1913), 75-85 (p. 84).

¹⁵⁴ 'Man is the Universe alive and conscious, and with the capacity of entire self-consciousness. This capacity, undeveloped and misunderstood, is the source of all man's misery, the hotbed of the idea of sin and the idea of God' (*The Theatrocrat*, p. 71).

¹⁵⁵ 'On Interviewing. A Prose Eclogue', *Speaker*, 12 January 1895, p. 46.

other words, it encompasses an Antiszygy of forms. Myth and history, legend and reality do not exclude but imply each other just as in nature two magnets attract each other if charged differently. Eccentricities of style and diction also characterise some of the earlier dramatic monologues, but with the *Testaments* Davidson intentionally created a 'new' kind of poetry, and, anticipating MacDiarmid, he explained in his own materialistic terms the features of 'the kind of poetry he wanted'. This self-reflective aspect is hermetically embedded in the verses, whereas it is plainly evident in the epilogue or preface to the plays which Davidson composed about the same period. Here is his poetic Gospel in the Introduction to *The Theatrocrat*:

It is a new poetry I bring, a new poetry for the first time in a thousand years: an abiding place for the imagination of man as matter-of-fact, as hard and fast, as ineluctable as Olympus and Hades, Asgard and Hela, Heaven and Hell were for our ancestors, and simpler and greater and more pleasurable than these, because it is no longer a dream of the Universe, but the Universe itself, in which the imagination of man must now find its abode. (pp. 51-52)

Similarly, two years later he would launch the same message in the Epilogue to *The Triumph of Mammon* (1907): 'It is a new poetry I begin, a new cosmogony, a new habitation for the imagination of men'.¹⁵⁶ Thus Davidson worded his idea of an encyclopaedic kind of poetry, all-embracing and limitless in scope and linguistic possibilities. The various Testators are the personification of this all-embracing poetic vision, being authoritative personalities who, by reviewing their own experience, act as prophets and, in Shelleyan terms, as 'unacknowledged legislators of the world'.¹⁵⁷ Each of them is actor and activator of some incident or ordeal which is didactically

¹⁵⁶ *The Triumph of Mammon*, p. 167.

¹⁵⁷ Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry', in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Donald H. Reinman and Sharon B. Powers (New York; London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1977), pp. 480-508 (p. 508). Undoubtedly the protagonists are all male. In various occasions Davidson reveals a sexist, rather than misogynist, opinion about women. The 'Dedication to the *Testament of John Davidson*' offers an example (see my comment later in this section). Misogyny crops up as a theme

communicated to the reader. Each of them is victim and victimiser -- the vivisector who experiences suffering through causing suffering, for example -- since he undergoes a learning process, or a series of ordeals, pre-ordained by himself in order to achieve the ultimate understanding of existence. Each Testator is the protagonist of a 'sort of spiritual Odyssey'¹⁵⁸ which does not lead to any religious epiphany but to the discovery of the truth of science and philosophy. The poems are 'testaments' as well as statements of 'Great Men' -- undeniably Carlyle is a lurking influence behind them; moreover the term 'testament', with its Biblical connotation, is a further example of Davidson's ironic and parodic treatment of the terminology of orthodox Christianity. In 1901 he wrote to William Archer: 'the spin of a penny determined whether I should call the poems statements or testaments'.¹⁵⁹ By means of a simple anagram, the poet suggests that the 'testament' as form and genre implicitly comprises other purposes than the merely confessional. The testators speak of themselves but are simultaneously the vehicle for the author's new statement on universal matter. The authorial presence is undeniably prominent throughout the poems. O'Connor identifies each testator as 'a poet trying to review his life, to apprehend and comprehend it, and ultimately to bequeath it' (p. 102). This could just as well be a description of Davidson himself.

Davidson wrote six *Testaments* between 1902 and 1908: *The Testament of a Vivisector* (1901), *The Testament of a Man Forbid* (1901), *The Testament of an Empire-BUILDER* (1902), *The Testament of a Prime Minister* (1904), 'The Testament of Sir Simon Simplex Concerning Automobilism' (1908, a much shorter poem), and *The Testament of John Davidson* (1908). The *Testaments* are complex, challenging poems, written in a form which, on the one hand, attempts to reproduce the cadence and movement of colloquial speech, yet on the other, includes a heterogeneous mixture of technical and specialist jargon. The style is both prosaic and highly

in a couple of articles published in *The Speaker* in 1899 (29 July, pp. 99-100, and 12 August, pp. 153-154).

¹⁵⁸ D. R. Lock, 'John Davidson and the Poetry of the Nineties', *London Quarterly and Holborn Review*, n. s. 5 (1936), 338-352 (p. 349).

¹⁵⁹ Quoted in *Selected Poems and Prose of John Davidson*, ed. by Sloan, pp. 194-195.

rhetorical and esoteric. As Townsend observes, 'the juxtaposition of the elevated and the commonplace continues to illustrate the paradoxicality in all things' (pp. 422-423). Undoubtedly, this kind of eccentricity was singled out by MacDiarmid who described his own style in terms which can be equally applied to Davidson's peculiar turns of diction:

I write now in English and now in Scots
To the despair of friends who plead
For consistency; sometimes achieve the true lyric cry,
Next but chopped-up prose; and write whiles
In traditional forms, next in a mixture of styles.¹⁶⁰

Davidson may have opted for English language only, but the stylistic variations of his verse testify to his constant search for a form of poetry which could encompass, to quote Whitman, 'multitudes', and embrace all kinds of experience, both thematically and formally. Hence the megalomaniac posture of the testators, which is perhaps the least appealing aspect of these poems, since it heralds the jingoism of Davidson's later poems. On the other hand, these 'overmen' are symbolically important, as they allow Davidson's abstruse thought to become more palatable and digestible through the dramatic representation of their own experience.

For example, the loathsome figure of the vivisector in the first testament becomes more acceptable after reading Davidson's self-criticism in a letter to William Archer. Taken literally, the vivisector can only cause aversion; taken symbolically, he becomes a figure of the poet as conceived by Davidson;

The passionate, obsessed giant, hating religion, despising the
'humanities', searching into the secrets of Nature in his bloody way
with the patience, delight, and self-torture of the artist, until the
commonplace of the philosopher that pain is normal and pleasure

¹⁶⁰ Hugh MacDiarmid, 'The Caledonian Antisyzygy', *Collected Poems*, II, pp. 1052-1053 (p. 1052).

little more than an accident, flashes upon him with overwhelming meaning, and the whole Universe which he identifies with Matter becomes to him a reservoir of pain -- an immense blind, dumb, unconscious artist, seeking for self-knowledge and expression at the cost of any agony.¹⁶¹

'Agony' is intended here in its original Latin meaning of 'agon', that is, contest or struggle, which Davidson sees as an axiom of universal life, thus evincing a link with Schopenhauer's philosophy. The vivisector struggles to grasp the significance of universal existence by means of his experiments. He is another Frankenstein, ready to endure any suffering which his Promethean deed might involve. In this poem Davidson distances himself from the humanitarian and philanthropic spirit of much Victorian culture, and professes instead the notion that the infliction of pain on other beings is a necessary experience to attain supreme knowledge and self-knowledge. It would be too simplistic to resort to sado-masochistic ideas to account for this aspect of Davidson's thought. However disagreeable it may appear, Davidson seems honestly to have believed his theory of human pain, particularly when he asserts that those who attain self-knowledge through suffering are 'strong minds, delivered and elect'¹⁶² -- the influence of Carlyle is probably lurking behind these words. Clearly Davidson makes constantly use of the language of his father's religion with subversive intentions. With extreme *amour propre* and bombast, the vivisector sees himself as one of these high-flyers capable of unfolding the riddle of the universe:

Where could the meaning of the riddle lie?
 Submissively, like a somnambulist
 Who solves his problem in a dream, I found
 The atonement of it, and became its lord --
 Lord of the riddle of the Universe,

¹⁶¹ 'Letter to William Archer, 15 June 1901', in *Selected Poems and Prose of John Davidson*, ed. by Sloan, pp. 194-195.

¹⁶² *The Testament of a Vivisector*, in *The Poems of John Davidson*, II, pp. 324-329 (l. 99).

Aware at full of Matter's stolid will
In me accomplishing its useless aim. (l. 141)

Line 145 is Davidson's indirect tribute to Ernst Haeckel's eminent book. The language of the poem is crude, deliberately savage, because the author's intention is to lay open man's primeval instincts. In a note appended to the poem, he wrote that the *Testaments* 'are addressed to those [...] who are not afraid to fathom what is subconscious in themselves and others'.¹⁶³ The final part of the poem is a *tour de force*; the theory of Matter is expounded in a tone which paradoxically oscillates between utter pessimism and high-flown egocentricity. Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Haeckel are echoed throughout the concluding lines:

It may be Matter in itself is pain,
Sweetened in sexual love that so mankind,
The medium of Matter's consciousness,
May never cease to know -- the stolid bent
Of Matter, the infinite vanity
Of the Universe, being evermore
Self-knowledge. (l. 223)

The protagonist of the second testament, the Man Forbid, made an earlier appearance in a prose contribution to *The Speaker*.¹⁶⁴ The poem is a verse translation of the themes developed in the essay. The Man Forbid is the prototype of a race of outcasts by choice who would like all the libraries of the world to be burnt -- thus foreshadowing Marinetti and his followers -- so that mankind can finally get rid of centuries of stale culture and give rise to a new life. 'Mankind has cast me out',¹⁶⁵ says the poet in the first line, although it is his own nature to stand aloof from the crowd,

¹⁶³ See *The Poems of John Davidson*, II, note 169, p. 512.

¹⁶⁴ 'The Man Forbid', *Speaker*, 5 March 1898, pp. 297-298.

¹⁶⁵ *The Testament of a Man Forbid*, in *The Poems of John Davidson*, II, pp. 329-334 (l. 1).

and observe their alienating existence from his own alienated position. Davidson always identifies the poet with someone who remains other and distanced from his fellow creatures, as in the following words:

Whether he be Homer the nondescript, Dante the outcast,
Shakespeare the player, or Burns the exciseman, the great poet is
always a man apart, separated out by his genius, and by some tragic
circumstance.¹⁶⁶

Once again Davidson's statement is self-revealing and, perhaps inadvertently, prophetic. The Man Forbid's cry 'Undo the past!' (l. 65) is not only the materialist's attack on 'profound Humanities and golden legends' (l. 70), which keep man imprisoned in the past. Implicitly, it is also the cry of the Scotsman who intends to escape the constraints of history, the ghosts of the past, and enter a new era in which matter is the only unifying factor, and body and soul are not two separate entities anymore.¹⁶⁷ The Man Forbid is the poet himself who, by leaving Scotland, also left his father's religion behind. The unidentified voice which banishes him because of his difference and foolishness is the voice of the World, of what he feels 'other' from himself -- the political and religious establishment. More specifically, it is the voice of his father, resounding and austere as if speaking from a pulpit:

Man springs from out the past: his tap-roots pierce
The strata of the ages, drawing strength
From every generation, every cult.
The scission of the smallest rootlet harms
His growth. (l. 176)

¹⁶⁶ 'On Poetry', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, II, Appendix A, pp. 531-538 (p. 534).

¹⁶⁷ 'The eyes and the ears are the main thorough fares of knowledge [...]. The body [...] is also the soul [...]. Imagination gathers the flower of the whole anatomy': this was written as early as 1899 in 'The Criticism of Poetry', *Speaker*, 4 March 1899, pp. 258-259 (p. 258). On July 1 of the same year he wrote: ' [...] of one thing I am certain: that the world will degenerate until men recognise that the body is the soul' -- 'Tête-à-tête. Lord Smith. Lord Tennyson', *Speaker*, 1 July 1899, pp. 741-743 (p.

The same voice casts him out for ever, and thus decrees his status as modern Ishmael and Wandering Jew. Between suicide and life as exile, the Man Forbid chooses the latter: 'For while I live the victory is mine' (l. 212). He finds consolation in wandering and contemplating landscape: deprived of the sympathy of humanity, nature still represents a haven to the poet, the 'other' which he can reconcile with himself. As in previous poems, the poet's view encompasses an image of the sea. The underlying Romantic symbolism builds up progressively in the last part of the poem and finally climaxes in these prophetic lines:

And I behold the period of Time,
 When Memory shall devolve and Knowledge lapse
 Wanting a subject, and the willing earth
 Leap to the bosom of the sun to be
 Pure flame once more in a new time begun:
 Here, as I pace the pallid doleful hills
 And serpentine declivities that creep
 Unhonoured to the ocean's shifting verge,
 Or where with prouder curve and greener sward,
 Surmounting peacefully the restless tides,
 The cliffed escarpment ends in stormclad strength. (l. 258)

The notion of time expressed in these verses is very close to MacDiarmid's own conception of time, space, and man as a wandering pilgrim through them in poems such as 'On a Raised Beach' and 'To Charles Doughtie'.

In *The Testament of an Empire-Builder* (1902) Davidson introduces an allegorical and a visionary element to convey his new vision of the universe and his evolutionary and materialistic ideas. By adopting the dream vision as device to engage

743). These words strikingly look forward to MacDiarmid's statement in *A Drunk Man* that 'Man's spreit is wi' his ingangs twined/ In ways that he can ne'er unwind'.

himself and the reader in an inquiry with metaphysical reverberations, Davidson enables the reader to enter the subconscious world of the protagonist, and, second-hand, of Davidson himself. The psychoanalytic aspect runs parallel to the mythical, almost fabulous, aura which permeates the whole poem. The animal allegory at the centre of the first dream vision is an exposition of the poet's scientific and philosophic convictions in the manner of Kipling's *Jungle Books* (1894-1895). By resorting to the evolutionary theory as starting-point, Davidson then develops his own theory of the universe and civilisation based on the conception of the 'overman' and his lust for knowledge and power. The central idea is that the principles which govern nature and human society are the struggle for power and self-assertion rather than Christian values.

The second dream vision represents another exemplification of Davidson's subversive treatment of Christian doctrines. The episode contains echoes of Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915), and his unorthodox interpretation of human religiousness as an inherent part of man's progress from magic rituals to the development of science. There is no evidence that Davidson read *The Golden Bough*, but the chances that he knew this pioneering work are very high, given the tremendous impact that it had on modern anthropology, and, subsequently, on literature -- Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and D. H. Lawrence were strongly influenced by it. Davidson's imperialist has a vision of hell and heaven which totally reverses the orthodox representation of the two afterworlds; after having the snake Aboma say that the Gods are

[...] 'Stock or stone, beast, bird,
Insect, or flame, or star, shadow of Man
Or fancied spirit, whom the Humans hold
Responsible, on whom they lightly lay
The intolerable burden of their sins.'¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁸ *The Testament of an Empire-BUILDER*, in *The Poems of John Davidson*, II, pp. 334-349 (l. 149).

the poet introduces the eccentric range of types inhabiting hell:

Materials of hell? The altruists;
 Agnostics; dreamers; idiots, cripples, dwarfs;
 All kinds of cowards who eluded fact;
 Dwellers in legend, burrowers in myth;
 The merciful, the meek and mild, the poor
 In spirit; Christians who in every deed
 Were Christians; pessimistic celibates;
 The feeble minds; the souls called beautiful;
 The slaves, the labourers, the mendicants;
 Survivors of defeat; the little clans
 That posed and fussed, in ignominy left
 By apathetic powers; the greater part
 Of all the swarthy all the tawny tribes;
 Degenerates; the desultory folk
 In pleasure, art, vocation, commerce, craft;
 And all the deniers of the will to live,
 And all who shunned the strife for wealth and power:
 For every soul that had been damned on earth
 Was damned in Hell [...] (l. 658)

On the other hand, heaven is the reign of the spokesmen of materialism and imperial power, of those who, like the protagonist, have given up the illusion of a world governed by benevolence and taken up the belief in strength and struggle as the means to grasp the truth of existence. In other words, Davidson's subversive operation aims to show that heaven hosts the elect but that the elect are exactly those individuals whom orthodox Calvinism would condemn as heretics. Hell-reversals also crop up in James Thomson and James Young Geddes. In Thomson hell does not represent the most disagreeable condition, which the poet identifies instead with the 'insufferable

inane'.¹⁶⁹ Clearly, even though they essentially purport to present a similar message, there is a difference between Davidson's and Geddes's ironic reversals of accepted dogmatism. Both poets intend to lay open the demagoguery and hypocrisy of the Church, to show that the ecclesiastical establishment plays with people's ignorance by providing them with facile consolations and legends. Both of them suggest that heaven and hell exist, yet not as otherworlds but as social and psychological earthly conditions. Nonetheless, whereas Geddes reverses the conventional dichotomy of good and evil by endowing hell with a positive significance, Davidson maintains -- though ironically -- the Manichean distinction and the common representation of hell as the site of the wrong and ignominious.

Nevertheless, the conclusion of the testament presents another ironic turn. 'For even in Heaven each ransomed soul frequents/ A private, an inevitable Hell!' (l. 710): in other words, every condition entails some drawbacks, every obverse of the coin has its reverse. This is the reason why even the empire-builder reveals doubts and hesitations, and for a moment he seems to lose his absolute self-confidence and admit that his own behaviour might be flawed:

The authentic mandate of imperial doom
 Silenced the drowsy lullaby of love,
 (Though now my turbid blood and nerves disused
 Complain of mystery unrevealed, and haunt
 Imagination day and night with looks --
 With beckoning looks, soft arms and fragrant breath;
 For even in Heaven each ransomed soul frequents

A private, an inevitable Hell!) (l. 704)

Eccentric visions of man and nature appear also in Davidson's two longest testaments: *The Testament of a Prime Minister* (1904) and *The Testament of John*

¹⁶⁹ *The City of Dreadful Night*, VI. 24.

Davidson (1908). The ideas illustrated in the previous testaments are reinforced, and the ironic and parodic use of Christian myth is taken to extremes, since the author's chief preoccupation is to expound the process whereby civilisation is evolving towards a new era when Christian humanitarianism will be replaced by the new gospel of scientific materialism. The prime minister and John Davidson are the mouthpieces of this new gospel and also the protagonists of the same process of development from orthodox religion, which they inherited from their ancestors, to materialistic creed. Therefore *The Testament of a Prime Minister* prefigures *The Testament of John Davidson*; the prime minister is one of Davidson's doubles, and, like the previous testators, he resorts to the devices of dream visions and parable to convey his message.

This is essentially achieved by means of another ironic representation of hell and heaven. On Doomsday, God welcomes the new inhabitants of heaven:

The kings, the conquerors, the wise, the bold.
The rich, the proud, and all the lusty lives
That took their power and pleasure in the world.¹⁷⁰

The irony continues in the description of the cursed party, formed by

Apostles, martyrs, votarists, virgins, saints,
The poor in spirit, the mourners and the meek,
And they that hungered after righteousness. (l. 971)

At the end of the testament the prime minister is described on the verge of death, when, almost transcendently, he has the ultimate vision of the nebular origins of the universe. According to Townsend the process that the protagonist undergoes 'corresponds to Yeats's mystic evocation of *Spiritus Mundi*, the world's collective spirit or memory' (p. 351). In the end, man is described as forming a unity with

¹⁷⁰ *The Testament of a Prime Minister*, in *The Poems of John Davidson*, II, pp. 349-372 (l. 946).

universal matter, and the prime minister's last words set forth the peculiarity of men's condition due to their being self-conscious matter:

Let them come again
 When sleep rehearses death, or death itself
 Takes up the cue: no dreams of mine are they,
 But Matter's dreams of old experience wrought
 In imperceptive atoms: while I wake
 I apprehend and master time and space,
 For this self-consciousness is masterdom. (l. 1188)

The tripartite structure of *The Testament of John Davidson* (1908) testifies to the long and laborious work that it involved. Overall the poem has a more elaborate form and a more complex content than the previous *Testaments*. This time it is the poet himself who undergoes a learning process, or, in this case, a journey of discovery and self-discovery through different historical and mythical ages which culminates in the understanding and adoption of what Turnbull defines as 'a vitalistic monism of substance'.¹⁷¹ The poem is an amalgam of classical and Romantic echoes, of religious and scientific jargons, and, from this gallimaufry of motifs and images, the figure of the protagonist stands out as a kind of epic hero going through various ordeals, or a modern Dante who must pass through hell -- at one point John Davidson descends into the nether world with the goddess Diana -- before achieving the ultimate goal.¹⁷² The descent to the otherworld recalls Hogg's description of Mary and Cela's supernatural pilgrimage in *The Pilgrims of the Sun* or Russell's journey to hell and heaven guided by Venus. Davidson's megalomaniac and glorifying vision of man climaxes in the protagonist's crucifixion in hell because of his copulating with a deity-- one of the most paradoxical and ironical episodes to be found throughout his works.

¹⁷¹ Turnbull, 'Introduction', p. xxvii.

¹⁷² Dante is also quoted in the poem when the protagonist enters the gates of hell and sees the famous inscription: 'All hope abandon ye who enter' (l. 841).

This is followed by his resurrection after purging the world 'of the last remnant left/ Of Other World' (ll. 2087-2088), and finally by his journey back to earth, where he eventually becomes incarnated self-conscious matter. The poem was originally entitled *The Testament of a Deliverer* and later *The Passionary of John Davidson*. He explained to the editor Richards that 'Passionary' is an old, almost unused, word for the history of a passion -- any passion: the passion of Christ or of Sappho',¹⁷³ and, even though he eventually ended up abandoning that title, he maintained the blasphemous irony of an advocate of materialism being a Christ-like figure. MacDiarmid's Drunk Man inevitably comes to mind because he equally manifests a metaphysical preoccupation, while at the same time he rejects the orthodox notion of divinity and religious symbolism.

Like James Thomson, John Davidson launches a nihilistic message proclaiming the death of God, but he suggests also that man -- at least the *Übermensch* like himself -- is a surrogate of God, and that he can bring about a new era by delivering mankind from both pagan and Christian superstitions. Hence John Davidson's allegorical battle against pagan deities and his final glorification through death and rebirth, similar to the gods of fertility in pagan mythology. Most critics agree that the long section dedicated to the meeting with Diana reveals obvious links with Keats's *Endymion*,¹⁷⁴ yet Keats is only one of a numerous list of antecedent writers lurking behind the verses of *The Testament of John Davidson*. Being his 'ideal biography',¹⁷⁵ the poem presents latent or evident literary influences embedded in the text, and the figure of John Davidson himself is a palimpsest of real and fictional characters who share the same titanic ambitions and the same heroic stance. Davidson indirectly offered some hints of the possible models of his testators:

Nietzsche has nothing to tell the Englishman of the 'overman', the Englishman is the 'overman', in Europe, in Asia, in Africa, in America, he holds the world in the hollow of his hand. Moreover,

¹⁷³ Quoted in Townsend, p. 415.

¹⁷⁴ See, for example, Sloan, 'Introduction' to *Selected Poems and Prose of John Davidson*, pp. ix-xxiii (p. xxii).

he has been stated in our literature again and again, the instances being these: Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, Shakespeare's *Richard III*, Milton's *Satan*, and Carlyle's *Cromwell*.¹⁷⁶

Carlyle's high-flown rhetoric and poised tone are echoed in the 'Dedication to *The Testament of John Davidson*', a letter full of bombast and jingoistic remarks which Davidson addressed to the 'Peers Temporal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland'. Whether the letter should be considered as a further extreme example of Davidson's ironic bent or as the ultimate document of an increasingly erratic mind is an open question. If one accepts that Davidson hides himself behind the mask of the English imperialist, then the letter is an important document about three of the main social and political questions of the time: Ireland's claim for independence; the problems of the working-class and the Labour Question; the condition of women and their protest against political discrimination. Nevertheless, the argument that Wales, Scotland and Ireland must bend their national and nationalistic claims to the requirements of the Empire bespeaks Davidson's personal urge to see himself as an exponent and mouthpiece of Britishness, to suppress the otherness of his situation and overcome his own ex-centricity. His patronising attitude towards the working-class, to which he belonged for some time, cannot but elicit antipathy. Yet, if one admits the presence of an ironic component, Davidson's despicable suggestion that the working-class had better read Burns, 'eat and drink lustily',¹⁷⁷ than hanker for individual and class amelioration, is a reflection of contemporary social inequity as well as of literary distortions and stereotypes.

Essentially the letter functions as a prose appendix to the poem; it rehearses the ideas expressed in the testament in a more explicatory style. It also sums up Davidson's convictions just before he took his own life, in order to be swallowed up in the dimension of matter like the protagonist of the testament. The letter encapsulates one of the three possibilities in Davidson's thinking before committing suicide, that is,

¹⁷⁵ O'Connor, p. 110.

¹⁷⁶ Quoted in C. Weygandt, *The Time of Yeats* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company Inc., 1937), p. 57.

to live on and act as the interpreter of the universe, as one of the fittest survivors. The second possibility was to remain aloof from the world and observe the flux and fragmentation of the universe -- this second position is exemplified in his last poems, in particular in *The Testament of a Man Forbid* and in 'The Crystal Palace', and it anticipates Eliot's and Yeats's poetic visions. The third possibility was to decide to withdraw completely from the world after realising that with the *Testaments* he had exhausted all his moral energy and strength to convince humanity that Matter is the unique principle and truth of the universe. In the 'Letter To the Peers of England' he suggests that the English are the true representatives of materialism because through the empire they have shown themselves to be the fittest people deserving to survive. Hence his message:

My lords, there is no Other World; there never was anything that man has meant by Other World; neither spirit, no mystical behind-the-veil; nothing not-ourselves that makes for righteousness, no metaphysical abstraction. Time is juggler's trick of the sun and the moon. There is only matter, which is the infinite, which is space, which is eternity; which we are [...]. Thus I break the world out of the imaginary chrysalis or cocoon of Other World in which it has slumbered so long; and man beholds himself, not now as that fabulous monster, half-god, half-devil, of the Christian era, but as Man, the very form and substance of the universe, the material of eternity, eternity itself, become conscious and self-conscious.¹⁷⁸

The protagonist of *The Testament of John Davidson* is both Everyman and Overman; he is the receptacle of all kinds of experience, the personification of universal life, encompassing all contradictions and paradoxes. Hence his decision to die immediately followed by the stronger will to live. Suicide is still presented as a plausible choice but he attempts to resist it, 'For when I die the Universe shall cease/

¹⁷⁷ See 'Appendix B', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, II, pp. 539-544 (p. 541).

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 544.

To know itself'.¹⁷⁹ Stoic resistance and instinctive will to live manage to suppress his suicidal thoughts, although he still believes that men are supreme, since 'No other living thing can choose to die' (l. 100). The fictional character of John Davidson, like James Thomson in *The City of Dreadful Night*, deems his life still worth enduring; unfortunately, this self-persuasion did not act on him in real life. In the concluding lines, he confirms his determination to brave existence, and he delivers his ultimate prophetic message:

I dare not, must not die: I am the sight
 And hearing of the infinite; in me
 Matter fulfils itself; before me none
 Beheld or heard, imagined, thought, or felt; [...]
 It may be that the Universe attains
 Self-knowledge only once; and when I cease
 To see and hear, imagine, think and feel,
 The end may come [...]
 Me, therefore, it beseems while life endures,
 To haunt my palace in the Milky Way,
 And into music change the tumult high
 That echoes through the vast, unvaulted courts
 Interminable, where the nebulae
 Evolving constellations, their spindles whirl. (ll. 2112, 2119,
 2128)

Here at least Davidson has found a music that sways the reader; these are lines which in their emotional and intellectual clarity and power challenge the best of twentieth-century poetry.

¹⁷⁹ *The Testament of John Davidson*, in *The Poems of John Davidson*, II, pp. 377-427 (l. 163).

The *Testaments* can undoubtedly dumbfound the reader in their eccentric and protean style as well as in their complex and esoteric content, but they also represent a significant and pioneering experiment in poetic styles and techniques. The same value can be attached to other poems that Davidson wrote at the end of his life. One of the most representative is 'The Crystal Palace' (1908), which provides an appropriate epilogue to the present chapter.

Turnbull saw 'The Crystal Palace' as 'the poet's finest individual achievement';¹⁸⁰ O'Connor includes it among Davidson's best poems, which she identifies with the volume *Fleet Street and Other Poems* (1909). Unquestionably, the poem is a major product of Davidson's eclectic writing and an outstanding example of his multifarious style. Because of its peculiar language and content, it is an early example of modernist poetry dealing with the ideas of flux, fragmentation and the search for a form to allow them meaning. Fragmented form is used to express fragmented meaning, or a meaning which is merely hinted at and alluded to by means of a hotchpotch of the most diversified images: industrial and technological bric-a-brac, such as the flying-machine; assorted facsimiles of European artistic masterpieces, such as Cellini's 'Perseus with the Head of Medusa' or Jean-Baptiste Clesinger's bronze of King Francis I; recreation rooms and culinary curiosities.

The Crystal Palace is the name of the gargantuan pre-fabricated building which was designed by Joseph Paxton to house the Great Exhibition of industrial and technical inventions at Hyde Park in 1851.¹⁸¹ Davidson visited it with Beerbohm in 1906, and was immediately struck by the chaotic mob and their frantic search for pleasure.¹⁸² Without expressing any open judgement but with the objectivity of a cameraman, Davidson speaks through the voice of his poetic *persona*, a distant and observing cicerone who only sporadically seems to intrude into the poem and allow his own sense of mockery and satire to appear in the text. The poetic tone oscillates between irony and targeted satire. The former is in fact ubiquitous, since the poet

¹⁸⁰ Turnbull, 'Introduction', p. xxxii.

¹⁸¹ See *The Poems of John Davidson*, II, note 175, pp. 521-524.

¹⁸² See Sloan, *John Davidson: First of the Moderns*, p. 222.

apparently seems to suggest that even such a 'colossal ugliness'¹⁸³ as the Crystal Palace can produce fascination, whereas the deeper significance which emerges is that this absurd entertainment park and symbol of technological progress is something to avoid and flee from. The whole poem is a series of climaxes and anticlimaxes until the end, where the ultimate anticlimax is the image of the narrator rushing to catch the train which will free him from the palace's labyrinth.

Sloan describes 'The Crystal Palace' as an image of the total abandonment of the human world, a vision of an object world devoid of meaning.¹⁸⁴ The only meaning is the absence of meaning, or the impossibility of defining a meaning which could bestow a certain order and form on the fragmented paraphernalia described by the poet. In a sense, in its absence of resolution, the poem is more post-modernist than modernist, even if the allusions to classical and modern art, and the reference to past artistic glories and contemporary scientific achievements, seem to insinuate that the yearned-for meaning corresponds to the juxtaposition of apparently clashing aspects: of past and present art, of archaic and modern language, of serious and grotesque imagery. The underlying question is, to quote O'Connor, 'how to name and to talk about this new fragmented experience' (p. 128), and Davidson's answer is not arrived at easily but lies behind and inside the verses, reflected in the language itself but never completely revealed. Language is like the 'distorting mirrors' (l. 57) of the Crystal Palace; true meaning remains concealed behind it, while one can only get a fragmented and vague idea of the significance of this modern allegory.

Unlike poems such as 'Fleet Street' and 'The Song of Fleet Street', both included in *Fleet Street and Other Poems* (1909), 'The Crystal Palace' leaves the reader with a semantic void, with a lack of a centre to which meaning can be attached. The vision remains eccentric throughout the poem, fragmented like the content of the Great Exhibition, and 'chillingly impersonal'.¹⁸⁵ Whereas in the other two poems the imperialist idea provides a steady centre to which the poet can constantly refer, in 'The Crystal Palace' the narrator simply observes and reports the incongruous assemblage

¹⁸³ 'The Crystal Palace', in *The Poems of John Davidson*, II, pp. 427-433 (l. 30).

¹⁸⁴ Sloan, *Selected Poems and Prose of John Davidson*, p. xxii.

¹⁸⁵ Sloan, *John Davidson: First of the Moderns*, p. 225.

of people and objects which constitute the exhibition and, on a larger scale, the contemporary world. Indeed the Palace is the 'Victorian temple of commercialism' (l. 14), the bulwark of Mammon, sublime and ugly at the same time, made out of nonperishable matter and therefore unnatural -- 'Tis nature's outcast' (l. 35). It is also ironically described as a church, as the place where the mob professes the new religion of commerce and progress:

In the main floor the fretful multitude
Circulates from the north nave to the south
Across the central transept -- swish and tread
And murmur, like a seaboard's mingled sound. (l. 52)

It is also a labyrinth in which the visitors are trapped like 'herds/ Imprisoned in a vast arena' (l. 138),

[...] here
A moment clustered; there entangled; now
In reaches sped and now in whirlpools spun
With noises like the wind and like the sea,
But silent vocally; they hate to speak:
Crowd; Mob; a blur of faces featureless,
Of forms inane; a stranded shoal of folk. (l. 139)

As O'Connor writes, a 'Dantesque atmosphere' (p. 129), similar to some descriptions in Eliot and Thomson, creeps about the place. The Palace is almost a 'city of dreadful civilisation', composed by fragments, as Thomson's city is composed by ruins, and lacking a centre that holds meaning. Like the inhabitants of the 'city of dreadful night', the mob visiting the Crystal Palace are wanderers, an 'unhappy locust-swarm,/ Instinctive, apathetic, ravenous' (l. 132).

The language to express the sense of such a disconnected factual reality cannot but be broken itself, a compilation of short, disjointed sentences, of harsh, strident

sounds, and encompassing a heterogeneous range of jargons and styles. From the very beginning the low and high registers are merged, the esoteric mingles with the everyday -- a mode which links Davidson with many Scottish writers who employ a similar stylistic and linguistic medley. As I have already pointed out, Thomas Carlyle's prose was an undoubted influence on the poet, both because of the issues it addressed -- such as the idea of Poet-Hero and of the Great Men -- and because of its peculiar style, constantly shifting from the highly poetic to the low and prosaic without causing inconsistency.¹⁸⁶

An activist like Henley and Stevenson, a professed imperialist like Kipling, for a time an impressionist like Wilde, Symonds, Le Gallienne, and other 'Rhymers', a social realist like Moore and Gissing, a mystic and symbolist like Lionel Johnson, Hopkins, and Yeats, Davidson bridged all these movements and yet emerged with a philosophy and style that are his own.¹⁸⁷

Among the gallery of Scottish eccentrics that I have analysed, Davidson is the most elusive and complex figure, affected by a form of eccentricity which eventually had disastrous consequences. Geddes's eccentricity was geographical as well as ideological and stylistic, but his clinging to the Scottish satirical tradition and his decision to remain in Scotland acted as his safety-valve against fatal solutions for the problem of identity. Davidson was a more tragic eccentric than Thomson, who was similarly aloof both from the Scottish tradition and the London intelligentsia, but who could also record in his poetry the brighter moments of his life as exile. Alexander

¹⁸⁶ In the 'Introduction' to *The Theatrocrat*, Davidson criticises Carlyle's Hero-worship, as well as Wordsworth's Nature-worship, because he sees it as a sort of new metaphysics which Carlyle devised in order to gain world-wide recognition. He calls this form of worship 'Carlyledom'. (see *The Theatrocrat*, pp. 13-14). Clearly, there is an underlying contradiction in his argument. Although he declared, 'I have no system; I have no dogma' (*The Theatrocrat*, p. 27), Davidson's materialistic ideas and his glorification of the individual are marked by a similar doctrinal flaw.

¹⁸⁷ Townsend, p. viii.

Smith was similarly divided between the Scottish and English traditions, but he was able to keep a distance from the potential risks of an antiszygical position, and his work records his capability of wavering between the two traditions without incurring devastating consequences. Davidson felt more dramatically the need to be recognised and accepted by the dominant literary culture, although he realised that his high ambitions clashed with the demands and hardships of a fierce reality, and that his Scottish background, in particular his religious upbringing, represented a cultural burden with which he could never completely dispense. He remained a man apart throughout his life, despite his attempt to subdue his Scottish origins to an idea of Britishness which could solve his inner tensions and contradictions.

John Davidson's personality and work thus provide a key with which to understand the predicament of the Scottish poet in the nineteenth century -- yet not the only one. His case exemplifies the unhappy state of those poets who occupy a half-way house between two traditions, yearning for a solution of their problem of identity, and yet unable to accomplish it because of the impossibility of shaking off their original culture. Nevertheless, nineteenth-century Scotland also presents different cases of poets who, instead of attempting -- and then failing -- to leave a culture and merge into a larger one, move in an eccentric fashion from one to the other, and thus accept and even profit from their being somehow 'other' from mainstream culture and James Hogg was one of them. MacDiarmid would be another. On the other hand, there were also poets like James Young Geddes who defied, rather than tried to adhere to, the dominant English tradition by resorting to the devices of parody and radical subversion of accepted ideas.

Davidson's work also displays forms of subversion and rebelliousness against orthodoxy, but generally his main target is his Scottish religious background. Davidson struggled to overcome his otherness and eccentricity, whereas most of the other nineteenth-century poets accepted and coped with their situation; Davidson tired himself out designing a philosophic and scientific theory which could have universal value and application in order to overcome his marginalised position. His plan was ambitious, and undoubtedly had repercussions on later poets and poetic developments. His all-embracing mental range paved the way for future visions and representations of

Scotland which helped to expand the significance of Scottish culture beyond locality, and made it possible to resist marginalisation and provincialism.

CHAPTER 6

JAMES YOUNG GEDDES

PART I

i. Another case of a neglected Scottish eccentric

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
 And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
 Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
 And Eternity in an hour.¹

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed and everywhere
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst .
 Are full of passionate intensity.²

When MacDiarmid acknowledged the genius of John Davidson, he should have treated other unrecognised Scottish literary talents with the same magnanimity, including James Young Geddes. Geddes has never received general critical acknowledgement, but he certainly deserved notice and attention at least on the part of someone like MacDiarmid, whose ideas and literary output are indebted to the Dundee poet more than he might have thought. Anyone embarking upon a study of Geddes, would be surprised by his continuing omission from the Scottish literary canon. Thus far he has not been considered even one of those 'minor' authors who

¹ William Blake, 'Auguries of Innocence', in *William Blake's Writings*, II, pp. 1312-1315 (p. 1312).

² W. B. Yeats, 'The Second Coming', in *Selected Poetry*, ed. by Timothy Webb (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 124.

are devoted, at most, just two or three lines of literary history.³ On the other hand, I feel indebted to the isolated, and therefore outstandingly remarkable, article on Geddes by Valentina Bold, and to Edwin Morgan's one-paragraph comment on some of his poems and the Whitmanesque quality of his verse.⁴ Despite the already mentioned Donaldson's and Leonard's studies of a conspicuous bulk of Scottish poetry excluded from the most authoritative anthologies, Geddes remains more or less unknown. Yet even more surprising is that it is difficult to be able to read Geddes's primary texts: his poetry has remained long out of print.⁵

Hence a reassessment of the poet is long overdue. Geddes ideally personifies the pivotal notions of 'eccentricity' and 'otherness' at the core of my thesis. He is definitely one of the 'absent' Scottish Eccentrics of MacDiarmid's study, one of those undervalued and unheeded voices of Scottish literature which were probably directing the course of Scottish arts and culture towards the same objectives identified by MacDiarmid and his followers two decades later. Nobody has ever succeeded in discerning Geddes's role in the re-awakening of Scottish poetry after the sluggish, toned-down tradition culminating in Pollok's *Course of Time* (1827), and concurrent with the Kailyard and *Whistle-Binkie*-style achievements. Geddes's importance is determined by two main factors.

First, Geddes's work relates to the Scottish poetic tradition of Ramsay, Fergusson, Burns, and Hogg in a more direct and remarkable way than the work of Davidson or Thomson. His link with eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Scottish poetry is bolstered by his strong rooting in the local tradition and culture of the place where he was born and educated, and by his independent decision to stay in

³ Maurice Lindsay's *History of Scottish Literature* (London: Robert Hale, 1977); Kurt Wittig's *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, 1958); J.H. Millar's *A Literary History of Scotland* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1903); Roderick Watson's *The Literature of Scotland* (London: Macmillan Education, 1984), to mention only some of the major books on Scottish literature, do not even mention his name. Douglas Young briefly comments on his works in 'Scottish Poetry in the Later Nineteenth Century', in *Scottish Poetry: A Critical Survey*, ed. by James Kinsley (London: Cassell & Company, 1955), 236-255 (p. 252).

⁴ The former appeared in *Scottish Literary Journal*, 19.1 (1992), 18-28, whereas the latter is part of Edwin Morgan's essay 'Scottish Poetry in the Nineteenth Century', in *The History of Scottish Literature*, III: *Nineteenth Century*, pp. 337-349 (p. 344).

⁵ The first editions of Geddes's works can be found either in the Mitchell Library (Glasgow) or in the National Library of Scotland.

a peripheral Scotland while most of his contemporaries were leaving the country in search of literary acknowledgement in the 'centre' -- England, and mainly London. He was one of the 'stay-at-homes',⁶ to borrow Kurt Wittig's term, set apart from those who yielded to the magnetic attraction of the cultural mainstream. Unfortunately, Wittig forgot to mention his name alongside those of other Scottish writers who followed Hogg's footsteps, and remained strongly anchored to the native tradition. Nonetheless, there is a second important element to take into account in order to understand and evaluate Geddes's writing more adequately. Even if he never worked nor lived outside Dundee and its surroundings, Geddes was receptive to literary and cultural influences coming from south of the Scottish border and even from abroad. He was not insulated from European literature and culture, exactly like MacDiarmid and Muir after him. By reading his poems, one can detect the influence exercised by some of his predecessors as well as the impact of contemporary cultural and social movements on his artistic frame of mind.

The quotations from Blake and Yeats at the head of this chapter were intended to evoke the eclectic and anti-parochial outlook which distinguishes Geddes from the advocates of a sentimental, backward-looking form of writing. Blake was an isolated, radical figure among the other Romantics; he defied both religious and literary orthodoxy, disrespectful towards dogmatic truths as well as towards classical and conventional prosody. Geddes's poetry, like Thomson's poetry, is permeated by Blakean echoes and motifs, especially when he revolts against the accepted values of his time and urges us to perceive what James Thomson expressed in these beautiful verses of his masterpiece: '[...] the bitter old and wrinkled truth/ Stripped naked of all vesture that beguiles'.⁷ Nevertheless, Geddes's invective against the religious and political hypocrisy of his age is uttered in a form and tone which have little in common with Blake's metaphysical and mythical vision, and never reach the depths of pessimism and nihilism of Thomson's poem. His poems are rather in tune with Bakhtin's idea of grotesque and topsy-turvy images of reality as a vehicle for specific social and moral comment. Yeats's poetry is likewise relevant in relation to

⁶ Wittig, p. 245.

⁷ James Thomson, *The City of Dreadful Night*, Proem. 10.

Geddes's achievement. I chose the famous passage from 'The Second Coming' as an epigraph to the chapter not only because Geddes composed a piece called 'The Second Advent', which, in many ways, anticipates the visionary quality of the Irish poet, but mainly because Yeats's poem introduces the image of a 'centre' which is disintegrating, of a world which cannot offer any stronghold, stability and cohesion to rely on. In short, the situation of the modernist is very close to that of the Victorian Scottish writer.

At the end of the nineteenth century, many Scottish talents left their native country because they could not cope with the increasing peripheralisation of Scottish affairs since the Union. Since Scotland had lost its cultural centre, individuals such as Davidson, Thomson, Gray thought that the solution was to look for a centre elsewhere, and London was the most obvious alternative. Their response to the widespread contemporary sense of estrangement and isolation from the focus of society was different from that of other individuals who, like Stevenson, chose a more extreme form of exile. Yet each of them, sooner or later, was condemned to a fate similar to that hanging over James Joyce. The 'old sow that eats her farrow'⁸ was not only Ireland but also Scotland at the time when England's affairs engulfed its neighbour country. The meaning of Joyce's sentence is that wherever such exiles go, they carry on their shoulder, inexorably, the burden of problems and frustrations that affect them; the stigma of their country is not effaced by simply departing from it. Joyce's pointed metaphor also explains that individual identity is not something affected and changed by new circumstances and events but something ingrained at birth. The Calvinistic concept of predestination is not very far from this theory considering genealogy responsible for social identity. Whether one accepts this interpretation or not, one fact cannot be dismissed: the gradual breakdown of illusions and dreams of almost all those who expected to find a new Arcadia or a world of endless possibilities outside Scotland. Thomson's insomniac wandering through London's urban labyrinth, often under the hallucinatory effects of his dipsomania, and Davidson's tragic death, are the extreme consequences of that

⁸ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. by Hans Walter Gabler with Walter Hettche (New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), p. 230.

failure. Even in the omphalos of British urban centres, they continued to be alienated, ex-centric human beings, arriving at the threshold of death with a fragmented and ruined identity that they could not restore to integrity.

Geddes represents a totally different case, notwithstanding the fact that he was similarly affected by both geographical and personal eccentricity. He experienced a geographical alienation because he deliberately decided to remain out of the centre, and pursue his career in Scotland. Yet his life-long residence in Dundee and the surrounding district resulted in another form of exile, what Edwin Morgan called 'internal exile',⁹ to refer to the condition of another poet whose name is strongly linked with Dundee, William McGonagall. Geddes was 'other' from the political and cultural establishment because of his unorthodox, radical views of man, society and literature. Aware of his dissimilarity, he did not see himself as a victim of estrangement from the British establishment; conversely his poetry is the projection of an integral, self-confident personality who succeeded in facing and overcoming the risk of a schizophrenic crisis of identity. Scotland was a choice for Geddes, but the Scotland he had in mind was not a country brooding on fallacious hopes of a new Golden Age and a return to the joys of pastoral life. Nostalgia for the past was alien to him; nor could he approve of a tendency to look too far ahead too hopefully. Geddes is the poet of the here and now, and even his visionary poetry has a strong hold on the present, on the current situation of his country. He is one of those Scottish writers who showed how it is possible to speak about Scotland without becoming parochial in politics and fanatical in religion. He proved that it was possible to overcome feelings of national inferiority and estrangement from within Scotland itself. Yet his contemporaries would not listen to him; they did not trust a self-taught poet who never travelled beyond the borders of his country, as early in the century the Edinburgh *literati* would not take Hogg seriously.

Geddes's solution to the problem of Scottish identity consisted of being eccentric and 'other' in his own country by means of his writing, selecting forms and subjects which were considered unorthodox and subversive by the contemporary

⁹ Morgan, 'Scottish Poetry in the Nineteenth Century', p. 345.

literary establishment. His role in contemporary poetry can be compared with that of George Douglas Brown in fiction; their works came out in the same period and represent the first significant attempts to convey an image of Scotland different from that of the Kailyard or pallid imitators of Burns. More specifically, Geddes personifies the Scottish individual who has come to terms with the internal divisions of his country, and the Scottish poet who knows how to make a profitable use of those divisions by turning them into the subject-matter of his own works. Moreover, he exemplifies also the Scottish writer who could broaden his literary horizons by looking at what was happening in the literatures of other countries, yet never neglecting the achievements and influence of his national predecessors. He could reconcile past and present by recognising and paying homage to those antecedents who left indelible marks on the history and literature of their countries, and, simultaneously, by writing a poetry addressing pressing issues of the time. The past is present in modernist poetry through the use of intertexts and cross-references to previous works; likewise, the ghosts of the past haunt Geddes's poetry, endowing it with a more universal appeal. His poetry could have reached a much wider audience if the scope and momentous intention of his ideas had been properly understood, whereas the reader of Geddes has nowadays to cope with the fact that 'little seems to be known beyond his books'.¹⁰

Geddes's poetry is therefore Scottish and non-Scottish at the same time, simultaneously within and outwith the Scottish tradition. Its roots are doubtless embedded in the Scottish literary tradition but it branches out towards other literatures and cultures -- past and present. Close reading of his poetry will show the links between Geddes and poets such as Burns and Hogg, as well as echoes of foreign writers -- predominantly Dante and Whitman. Geddes dedicated three poems to Burns, and evoked his spirit elsewhere in his works. In each case, it is especially Burns's radicalism and anti-conventionalism that the poet focuses on, while he severely criticises the legend and cult which distorted the true nature of the Ayrshire bard. Foreshadowing MacDiarmid, Geddes might have said that 'the Burns cult

¹⁰ Morgan., p. 344.

must be killed stone-dead [...] The whole *raison d'être* of the Burns Club is to deny that Burns was Burns [...].¹¹ Anyway, Geddes's censure of those critics and writers who warped the genius of Burns was a specific lamentation backed up by a more general protest. The misrepresentation of Scotland's national poet was a symptom of a wider phenomenon which preoccupied the whole nation. Geddes believed that Burns's identity had been garbled in consequence of the sense of loss and confusion felt by the whole nation when it became clear that Scotland no longer had a cultural centre to refer to. Old beliefs and traditions were shaken by new currents of thought and trends coming from the South, and most of the writers from Hogg onwards found it increasingly difficult to accept these changes without incurring a personal crisis.

Despite his political and ethical radicalism, Geddes was open to the literary influences coming from England and able to absorb them without giving up his own individual voice. Consequently, his poems present a variety of personal and traditional characteristics. Hence the Romantic and anti-Romantic echoes in his works, and his diffuse use of Scots, which allows him to create a typical Scottish context but also to communicate meanings going beyond the Scottish vernacular tradition. He was similar to Hogg in that he assimilated elements from different literary sources in his own personal fashion, reinterpreting them to suit his own voice and purposes. More convincingly than Hogg, Geddes handles diversified threads and manages to entwine them to weave a heterogeneous yet cohesive, self-supportive text. Behind his poetic *personae* and shifting roles, the presence of the author is constantly signalled by his distinctive style and prosody. Without shaking off the undeniable influence of past traditions and present developments, Geddes succeeded in preserving his poetic identity and individual talent by assimilating their attributes, and bending them to his needs. Hence the beautifully constructed mixture of literary cross-references and reminders in his poems. Echoes of Burns, Hogg, Carlyle as well as Dante, Milton, Blake and Whitman are ubiquitous in Geddes's verses, the

¹¹ Hugh MacDiarmid, 'The Burns Cult', in *At the Sign of the Thistle. A Collection of Essays* (London: Stanley Nott, 1934), pp. 168-172 (p. 168).

diversified traditions they represent being blended together by the eclectic style of the author.

Geddes was an autodidact like Hogg, but he also took active part in study groups, and joined various literary societies, which may have given him the chance to read and comment on a diverse range of literary texts. There is no evidence of when he started to read Whitman, but certainly the American writer must have had a very strong impact on him. In particular, *Leaves of Grass* (1855) exerted a considerable influence on both his style and themes. Like the technique and language adopted by Whitman -- but also, among others, Carlyle, Hopkins and Hardy -- the mode of expression characteristic of Geddes's most successful pieces of work eludes any easy categorisation. In fact, it could be defined as prose poetry -- or verse prose -- a kind of discourse and idiom obtained by the indistinct use of the characteristics of the two modes, and varying according to the themes tackled by the poet. Even if the verse form is not dictated by a specific and fixed scheme, it still presents figurative devices which are conventionally associated with the poetic mode, such as onomatopoeia, assonance, alliteration and metaphor. The rhythm ranges from a fluid, almost colloquial form to a broken, fragmented discourse -- a sort of poetic transposition of the stream of consciousness technique. Geddes's poetry is overall marked by a very significant link between form and content. Moreover, Whitmanesque traits appear also in its themes. The author of *Song of Myself* is loudly echoed in those poems which evince Geddes's rejection of dogmatic and absolute truths. Verses such as these:

Creeds and schools in abeyance,
Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never
forgotten,
I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,
Nature without check with original energy.¹²

¹² Walt Whitman, 'Song of Myself', in *Leaves of Grass*, ed. by Francis Murphy (London: Penguin Books, 1977), pp. 63-124 (p. 63).

are largely echoed in Geddes's poems. In another passage of the same poem, Whitman appeals to the reader in these terms: 'You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self' (p. 65). These words sound like a motto which Geddes followed throughout his life.

In many ways, Geddes's style is very close to the prosaic diction of Clough's poetry, but also to the poetic allure of Dickens's prose. Some of his poems are characterised by dramatic and emotional notes, yet Geddes is at his best when he is dealing with deeply stirring themes without showing his personal feelings, but letting facts, characters and images speak for themselves. His most successful poems display touches of impressionistic and imagist poetry, and are composed in a matter-of-fact, at times almost phlegmatic, style. This pre-modernist attitude is most frequent in those poems which focus on contemporary social questions. The poet's choice of a cold expository style, which tends to catalogue and present facts or situations objectively, produces an opposite effect on the reader; his outwardly unfeeling tone still manages to stir emotions, in particular when he describes circumstances which are morally unacceptable. Thus Geddes's poems invite the reader to support the plight of the social outcasts and the exploited victims of industrialisation. In many respects, some of his most impressive poems anticipate T. S. Eliot's definition of poetry as 'not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; [...] not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality'.¹³ Even though the reader's response may be emotional, the author implies that this response should then turn into an action. Geddes's cry to social and cultural activism remained unheard until MacDiarmid, albeit unconsciously, took it up, and remodelled it to suit the aims of his literary and political program. Many years before MacDiarmid, Geddes showed a renewed concern for the destiny of his country by disclosing its inner divisions and contradictions, and, simultaneously, suggesting a way of coping with them. The way is not stoic endurance, as James Thomson implied, but active commitment in all cultural discussions and social movements

¹³ 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *T. S. Eliot. Selected Prose*, ed. by John Hayward (London: Penguin Books, 1953), pp. 21-30 (p. 30).

concerning the country. According to this view, literature becomes a mode and means of transmission of aspects and forms 'other than' literature itself.

Geddes's work and thought are therefore in step with Sartre's notion of *littérature engagée* and with MacDiarmid's conception of an all-embracing, interdisciplinary poetry. Yet he represents a peculiar case, because his political and social involvement through writing is not immediately national; it starts off as a personal interest in local problems and debates, and in the radical tendencies of his native district. A local colour and perspective runs through his whole production, but gradually it develops into something of greater significance and wider appeal. The poet's representation of the effects of technological revolution on the Dundee and Alyth communities becomes the microcosmic picture of the national aftermath of industrialisation. The local flows into the national picture, the problems faced by Alyth community become also the problems of the Scottish nation, and the poet acts as the sibyl of his own country. In some cases, his argument can be extended to issues which go beyond locality and embrace the whole human condition, thus defying the accusation of provincialism and parochialism often made against Scottish literature. To the question concerning the poet's role within his own country, Geddes might have answered as MacDiarmid did in *A Drunk Man Looks At the Thistle*:

*'A Scottish poet maun assume
The burden o' his people's doom,
And dee to brak' their livin' tomb. '14*

In other words, Geddes attributed to the poet a pre-Nietzschean quality of *Übermensch*, combined with Carlyle's image of the 'hero as poet', a *Vates* who can perceive what is beyond the reach of ordinary men, and eventually divulge that mystery. This prophetic faculty is less emphasised by Geddes than by Carlyle, but it

¹⁴ Hugh MacDiarmid, 'A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle', p. 165.

is embedded in his most outstanding poems, where the poet is simultaneously, in Carlylean terms, 'the Politician, the Thinker, Legislator, Philosopher'.¹⁵

There are of course Romantic and post-Romantic precedents for this notion of poet as guide, like Shelley's definition of poets as 'unacknowledged legislators of the world', but in Geddes, as well as in MacDiarmid, it carries a more specifically national overtone, which consists in their association with the Scottish tradition of visionary poetry. After Hogg's 'Kilmeny' and *The Pilgrims of the Sun*, one must wait more than fifty years before reading again outstanding visionary poems about Scotland. Geddes's 'Scottishness' depends also on another factor, which characterises his style as well as his themes, that is, the comic vein of most of his poems. Even serious themes are often treated humorously, and this discrepancy between form and subject-matter generates burlesque effects. The spirit of eighteenth-century Scottish satirical poetry is revived by Geddes especially when he dwells on contemporary political and religious issues. Geddes's involvement in local bureaucracy and administration is part of the peculiar political history of his native region.

ii. Life and works

James Young Geddes was born in Dundee in 1850 from a family of working-class background.¹⁶ His mother, Agnes Young, was the daughter of a shoemaker while

¹⁵ Thomas Carlyle, 'On Heroes. Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History', in *Sartor Resartus and On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1927), pp. 255-496 (p. 334).

¹⁶ All biographical information is from Valentina Bold's article, the poet's obituaries in *The Dundee Advertiser*, and the *Blairgowrie Advertiser* (1 November 1913), p. 5, and the following sources: Edwin Morgan, 'A Note on James Young Geddes', *Gairfish*, 4 (1991), 96-7; 'James Young Geddes', in *The Bards of Angus and Mearns*, ed. by Alan Reid (Paisley: J.T.R. Parlane, 1897), p. 179; David H. Edwards, 'James Young Geddes', in *Modern Scottish Poets: with biographical and critical notes*, 16 vols (Brechin: D. H. Edwards, 1880-1897), I, pp. 244-246; *The Harp of Perthshire. A Collection of Songs, Ballads, and Other Poetical Pieces Chiefly by Local Authors*, ed. by Robert Ford (Paisley: Alexander Gardner, 1893), p. 463; *Scottish Verse 1851-1951*, ed. by Douglas Young (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1952), p. 321; Henry Dryerre, *Blairgowrie, Stormont and Strathmore Worthies* (Blairgowrie: Henry Dryerre; Paisley: Alexander Gardner; Edinburgh: John Mensies & Co., 1903), pp. 341-350.

his father, Andrew Geddes, was a tailor and clothier -- a profession which James inherited and continued to practice in Dundee and Alyth. He moved to the small community town in 1882,¹⁷ and lived there until his death in 1913. In Dundee he received primary and secondary education until the age of 16; from that moment onwards he was an autodidact, his self-education consisting of both individual, solitary readings and participation in literary groups such as the Tay Square Presbyterian Church Literary Society and the Lindsay Street Congregational Church. He withdrew from the first group when he realised that its pastor, Rev. Dr. M' Gavin, was too strictly orthodox, and thus joined the Lindsay Street Church, which was then under the charge of Rev. John Wallace, the very open-minded minister to whom Geddes dedicated a poem.

It was in Lindsay Street Church that he became acquainted with other young radical spirits such as William Reid, the chief sub-editor of the *Dundee Advertiser*, W. F. Black of the *People's Journal* and James Cromb of the *Evening Telegraph*. It is likely that they were among the radicals who joined Geddes in the foundation of a Radical Association.¹⁸ Dundee is often associated with the development of the popular press, and of course with its more general trading and industrial life, favoured particularly by its geographical position on the estuary of the River Tay. Politically it is renowned for its radical tendencies, while in an earlier age it opened its doors to the diffusion of Protestantism. It was in Dundee that the Wedderburn brothers compiled the first Scottish collection of hymns, psalms and secular songs, the *Gude and Godlie Ballatis*.¹⁹ In 1879 appeared Geddes's first collection of poems: *The New Jerusalem and Other Poems*. His two other main volumes -- *The Spectre of Alyth and Other Selections* and *In the Valhalla and Other Poems* -- came out respectively in Alyth in 1886 and in Dundee in 1891. The latter collection comprises songs from the juvenile opera *The Babes in the Wood*. Other works by Geddes include a *Guide to Alyth* (1913), and a series of essays and articles published in various journals and papers, such as *The Weekly Sun*, *The Weekly Star* and *The*

¹⁷ *The Blairgowrie Advertiser* suggests that he moved one year later, in 1883.

¹⁸ See Dryerre, p. 346.

Dundee Advertiser. He continued to contribute to local journalism until his death, occurred on October 30th 1913, 'after nearly a fortnight's illness, contracted when on his way home from a meeting of the Literary Society'.²⁰

After his arrival at Alyth, Geddes became a political activist and supporter of the working-class in several public disputes, such as the Kirriemuir/Reekie Linn right-of-way and the Jordanstone right-of-way;²¹ he always acted as spokesman for the people, and campaigned on social issues, such as the general improvement of Alyth's community life. His initiative towards the amelioration of the burgh sanitation led to the formation of a Working Men's Municipal Party with Geddes as head, and won him a place on the Police Commission. He was also the oldest member of the School Board. He carried on his family business as well as his journalistic writing, which consisted mainly of contributions to the radical newspaper *The Dundee Advertiser*, founded by Lord Cockburn and other Whigs in 1801. A curiosity concerning his career as columnist is that he published his articles under pen-names, a device which other Scottish writers adopted both in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century, including of course Christopher Grieve. The use of a pseudonym fulfils the same function as social role-playing, to which writers resort in order to express ideas which would not normally find access to public papers. Such a game of identities often implied a humorous element, which acted as an effective device to bypass the authorities' censorship, so that unorthodox ideologies could circulate under a playful disguise.

In the nineteenth-century political polarity between Toryism and revived radicalism, Geddes sided with the latter, even when he was elected Senior Bailie of Alyth. His contributions to radical papers can be compared with James Thomson's involvement in the activities of Bradlaugh's *National Reformer*. The late nineteenth-century was a period of political turmoil and cultural anxiety, and each Scottish writer reacted in different, individual ways, both in public and in private life. In

¹⁹ I found this information in Trevor Royle, *The Mainstream Companion to Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh and London: Mainstream Publishing, 1993), pp. 97-98.

²⁰ 'Death of Ex-Bailie Geddes, Alyth', *The Blairgowrie Advertiser*, November 1 1913, p 5.

²¹ The latter was an agitation against the closing-up of various roads in the Jordanstone estates. See the *Dundee Advertiser*, 1 November 1913, p. 9.

Geddes's poems, the public persona of the author often overlaps with his private counterpart, whereas there is a more substantial gap between Thomson's hack journalism and his poetry. Whereas Geddes's poetry generally focuses on national or world-wide issues rather than on his personal experiences, Thomson's poetry always carries the signs of the poet's own personal tragedies and individual *Weltanschauung*, even when its themes have a universal significance. In this respect, Geddes's works are closer to the expressive mode and style of realism and naturalism, whereas Thomson's writing encompasses a post-romantic and pre-existentialist vision of the world.

Geddes was brought up in a Presbyterian environment with strong Calvinistic beliefs, and he was certainly influenced by the traditional notion of the 'goodly community' -- Alyth was one of the few village communities which survived industrialisation. But he was a seceder from the Established Church of Scotland, and became more and more suspicious of any form of organised and systematic creed. His doubts and oscillations in matter of religion emerge in some of his poems; but it is not sure whether he completely stopped believing in the religion of his fathers or continued to cling to a personal interpretation of that religion. It cannot be ascertained if his family's tragedies were felt as blows to his religious faith, but certainly the experience of death was very familiar to him -- his son Andrew committed suicide, and he also lost two other children and two sisters. Yet his poetry does not record this morbid side of his existence, which might suggest that his faith was not shaken by those events and perhaps even helped him to accept and interiorise them.

PART II

Poetry and ideas

The title of Geddes's first published collection of poems indicates the central concern of the author. *The New Jerusalem and Other Poems* (1879) starts off with the poem which lent its title and essential themes to the whole volume. Geddes's chief consideration here is to bring to light the hypocrisy and unreliability of the contemporary religious establishment. It is significant that the poem was written at the time when Geddes decided to leave the Tay Square U. P. Church Literary Society because of its conservative views. In these early poems the reader can already derive a sense of Geddes's individual doubts and critical views concerning the faith he learned at school and from his family. In the later volumes, his ideas on religious and political matters are voiced with more conviction and therefore, the poems are a more directly targeted denunciation of the Victorian spiritual malaise. The spirit of Carlyle bears upon *The New Jerusalem and Other Poems* from the very Preface, which is a quotation from the Victorian sage himself:

Does not the whole wretchedness, the whole atheism as I may call it of man's ways, in these generations, shadow itself for us in that unspeakable life-philosophy of his: the pretension to be what he calls 'happy'? Every pitifulest whipster that walks within a skin has his head filled with the notion that he is, shall be, or by all human and divine laws ought to be, 'happy'. His wishes, the pitifulest whipster's, are to be fulfilled for him; his days, the pitifulest whipster's, are to flow on in ever gentle current of enjoyment, impossible even for the gods. The prophets preach to us, Thou

shalt be happy; thou shalt love pleasant things and find them. The people clamour, Why have we not found pleasant things?²²

'Happy' is the key-word of this passage, and it introduces one of the central issues of the volume: the meaning and form of human happiness. Carlyle suggests here that prophets and preachers often mislead men to believe that they are entitled to present and future happiness, and that this deceptive promise becomes the source of men's wretchedness when they realise that what they expected is only a figment of the imagination. Man should recognise instead that total and permanent happiness is impossible to achieve on earth, and that there is no of a redeeming afterlife. 'The New Jerusalem' calls into question the orthodox belief in the pleasures of Christian paradise, and to the notion of perfect happiness opposes a different and 'eccentric' idea of human joy on earth. *Carpe diem* is the message that Geddes seems to whisper in many passages of the poem.

What is the New Jerusalem? The name itself calls to mind both Biblical and secular visions of a place where man can realise his dream of happiness. The possibility for man to build an ideal society has been a preoccupation of many philosophers and writers since the pre-Christian era. Plato's *Republic* is the first example of utopian literature, followed by many other writers in different countries, from Dante's *Paradiso* and More's *Utopia* to Herbert George Wells's *Men like Gods* (1823) and William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890). In Romantic and post-Romantic literature the term and its associations recur, *inter alias*, in Blake's *Jerusalem* (1804) and very diffusely in Yeats's poetry. The timeless fascination of utopian themes still continues to capture contemporary writers and critics such as, for example, Marcuse and Adorno.²³

Geddes's 'The New Jerusalem' is in step, both thematically and structurally, with a long literary tradition, but, more importantly, it subverts it by gradually

²² James Young Geddes, *The New Jerusalem and Other Poems* (Dundee: James P. Matthew and Co., 1879), unnumbered page.

²³ Examples of contemporary utopian fiction are Ursula LeGuin's *The Dispossessed* (1974), Donna J. Young's *Retreat* (1979), Josephine Saxton's *The Travails of Jane Saint* (1980), to mention but a few.

showing the initial Utopia as an undesirable Dystopia. A similar overturning occurs in Golding's, Orwell's and Huxley's novels. The dystopian representation of the New Jerusalem ends up with a Blakean and Byronic reversal of conventional values, so that we reach the paradoxical conclusion that the New Inferno, central to the other major poem of the volume, is a more desirable state. The two poems are indeed strongly connected, and can be read as one long verse narrative in two parts, or a play in two acts. It does not come as a surprise to see the heroic couplet used throughout the two poems, because they evince all the characteristics of the poetic genres employing this form -- the narrative, the dramatic and the satiric. As a counterpoint to this regular prosody, the poet makes use of a long polysyllabic line and a flowing discursive style, which bestow a strong prosaic modulation on the whole work.

At the beginning of 'The New Jerusalem', the narrator, identifiable with the author himself, immediately situates the reader *in medias res*; the scene is set in the New Jerusalem, the heavenly town, where 'strange and startling news'²⁴ have just arrived: Sir Peter is dead and is about to join the court of heaven. The identity of the newcomer is not revealed, but from what is said about his reputation on earth, it can be deduced that he was an individual highly esteemed by his community -- his pastor called him 'saint'. In the opening section the narrator paraphrases Peter's pastor during the mourning ceremony. The homily episode is one of Geddes's most humorous pieces of religious satire. The utilitarian and materialistic bent of the established Church is denounced by the poet by means of ironic sentences; even though the general tone is light and humorous, his words incorporate cutting remarks against religious hypocrisy. The whole passage abounds in words or expressions which refer to money and profit. The pastor underlines Peter's spiritual nobility by reminding the audience of his generous five-pounds donation to repair the Church's heating system, and the poet/narrator concludes:

Such themes as these are ever new, and never pall

²⁴ 'The New Jerusalem', in *The New Jerusalem and Other Poems*, pp. 3-26 (p. 3). Further quotations are from this edition and indicated internally by page number.

On congregational palates -- so the most agreed
 The new discourse was highly *profiting* indeed;
 [...]

Thus did the Church with sermon clear its heavy score
 Of deep *indebtedness*. What could a Church do more? (pp. 5-6)
 [my italics]

There may be a deliberate ambiguity in the use of the name 'Peter'; at first the reader may incur the mistake of identifying the newly elect with Saint Peter. The riddle is solved when, later on in the poem, Peter asks information about the apostle. The concerned Peter is a 'Sir', thus supposedly an eminent figure in political affairs. In fact, the title is used with mockery, and conceals the poet's sneer at class discrimination.

After a *caesura* and a brief preliminary statement, the poet makes Peter enter the New Jerusalem -- 'the realms of everlasting day' (p. 6). Immediately Peter finds himself face to face with the hyperbolic hierarchical system of the place. In a Kafka-like manner, Geddes describes the nuisance and preposterousness of an organisation based on useless formalities and endless praxis. His tone is cold, his register statistical; the underlying didactic message is obvious: the eternal city is based on a system which perfectly mirrors the ecclesiastic apparatus on earth, and Geddes uses the parallel to vilify obliquely any systematised doctrine and religious hierarchy. The allotment of a specific niche to each new saint is a reminder of Dante's reasoned division of the otherworld into different circles and spheres, but the cross-reference to *The Divine Comedy* conceals the poet's parodic intent and hence produces a Bakhtinian inversion-effect on traditional views and values. 'I promise you that here above there is no dearth/ Of good society' (p. 8), the angel-guide says to Peter: where are therefore the pleasures promised by the preachers? The angel's statement takes us back to the opening quotation from Carlyle.

In order to witness these 'pleasures' with his own eyes, Peter is led by the heavenly guide through the New Jerusalem. In this respect, the poem is visionary and based on the leitmotif of the journey across the otherworld/s, which often recurs

in nineteenth-century Scottish and non-Scottish literature. Hogg's 'Kilmeny' and *The Pilgrims of the Sun* are obvious precedents, alongside older and more modern examples of visionary poetry, from ballad-literature and Ramsay to Geddes's contemporaries. The angel guiding Peter is a descendant of previous Virgil-like journey companions, such as Cela in *The Pilgrims of the Sun*, Kilmeny's 'reverend fere', and the seer in Pollok's *Course of Time*. Peter's vision encompasses an idyllic pastoral picture which contrasts with the baroque pomposity of the graphical and verbal representation of heaven depicted by his pastor. This offers Geddes another opportunity to criticise the demagogic sermons of many Church representatives. The main attribute of the envisioned picture is a 'calm serenity' (p. 9), which reflects the nature of the place and its inhabitants. These are mostly 'drowsy-eyed' (p. 13) souls, with a highly intellectual and absent look, and, among them, there is even a group of saints whose demeanour is so patronising that the guide herself prefers to avoid them. The radical poet is here attacking the elitist attitude prevalent among the literary societies of the time, which were often associated with religious organisations and sects. The fact that he could take active part in them and simultaneously perceive their inner flaws is a significant sign of his shifting identities.

Finally, Peter is accompanied to his dwelling -- 'a gorgeous mansion, strictly self-contained' (p. 16) -- situated in a place as restful as the rest of heaven, and treasuring an assorted library of canonical ecclesiastical treatises. It is apparent here that the author distances himself from the description to share with his readers the sense of ridicule and paradox stemming from the situation. Even Peter himself thinks 'it strange such books in Heaven to find'.²⁵ When he asks his guide if he is supposed to accomplish any specific task, the shocked angel replies that '[...] no unhallowed trace/ Of care or work you find in this celestial sphere' (p. 19). The previous image of a well-structured and organised heaven is gradually undermined by the guide's depiction of Jerusalem as a place where imagination is never curtailed, and where people are utterly free to do or not to do things as they please. In fact, this

²⁵ The books referred to are *Signs of the Times* (1742) by John Erskine, and other treatises such as *Gospel Trumpets* (on the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, published in Belfast in 1835), and copies of *Monthly Visitors*.

apparently ideal condition turns out to be a state of idleness controlled from above by superior authorities; the speciously free position of each soul is instead preordained by the same arbiters during their general assemblies.

Peter's attitude becomes increasingly inquisitive. His initial happiness and enthusiasm are gradually replaced by a sense of general dissatisfaction and boredom with the place. He notices that the Apostles and many other famous Biblical figures are absent, and asks the guide for an explanation. Then the shocking answer arrives:

'Left to their choice, they rather chose to go below.

[...] They thought it tame

To dwell in Heaven with every day the same.' (p. 21)

So Elijah, Peter, Paul and many others decided to descend to the lower regions because they could not cope with the artificial stillness and idleness of the New Jerusalem. They share company with men who were once great scientists and intellectuals, like Milton and Galileo, for whom the perpetual restfulness of heaven was not a desirable utopia but an unbearable forced torpor of body and mind. Peter recalls then his pastor's sermon against the danger of excessive learning and intelligence, and quotes his resounding words: '[...] the danger lies/ When youthful intellects presume to criticise' (p. 23). Geddes's silent indignation is this time directed against the Calvinistic veto on creative imagination and freedom in arts and thinking. In the regions, below these exiles from heaven can pursue the activities they left interrupted on earth without being subjected to any censorship and limitations imposed by the establishment.

Peter's second question concerns exactly the life-style of the exiles. He imagines that they live in 'drear monotony' (p. 25), but the guide projects a totally different picture in front of his eyes. Hell is the negation of the sluggishness and inertia of Heaven; it is the world of 'noisy traffickings' (p. 26), of toil and sweating, of anti-pastoral and restless activities. The guide describes the changes brought about by Heaven escapees:

[...] The blasting air
 They found beneath was changed to autumn's mellow heat,
 And darkness visible they lighted up with fair
 Bewitching beams, such beams the eyes of mortals greet
 Who walk enamoured 'neath the moon. (p. 25)

The intertextual reference to *Paradise Lost* clearly produces a comic reversal of the original: in Milton 'No light, but rather darkness visible' characterises the 'Dungeon horrible', whereas in Geddes utter dimness is diluted by the paradoxical intrusion of some Heaven renegades.²⁶ Even the guide does not sound completely averse to Hell here -- perhaps he pondered on the possibility of leaving Heaven himself. Yet he must perform his task and persuade Peter that Heaven is the place of real joy while Hell is the home of 'dull activities' (p. 25). The angel tries to convince Peter that Hell is a dystopian place where he should not wish to go, but the astounded pilgrim is not easily converted to his guide's advice. At the end of the poem he personifies the scepticism and religious doubt of the author himself.

'The New Inferno' is a continuation of the previous poem, both in its form and content. The vision of the angel guide gradually materialises in front of Peter's eyes. 'Energy is Eternal Delight' writes Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*,²⁷ and the reason why Peter gradually loses interest in Heaven and begins to feel the boredom of the whole atmosphere is that the land appears to him devoid of animation and totally sunk into ennui. The eternal happiness he had long yearned for on earth, once attained, turned out to be deceptive, the illusion of a dream. He reflects on the insatiable desire of pleasure which harrows every individual, and makes durable happiness a non-condition of being. The Carlylean preface to the volume is echoed again in Peter's words:

²⁶ The references from *Paradise Lost* are from *The Poetical Works of John Milton*, ed. by H. C. Beeching, 4th edn (London; New York; Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1950), pp. 173-448, I. 63 and I. 61.

²⁷ *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. 'The Voice of the Devil', in *William Blake's Writings*, I, pp. 74-99 (p. 78).

‘Man’s most voracious appetite would feed on bliss,
Bliss upon bliss, and still insatiate seek the strange,
And Heaven upon his soul appears to work no change’.²⁸

Peter encounters another soul similarly distressed and choked by the never-changing apathy governing heaven. This anonymous spirit comes suddenly into sight after uttering a few words of discontent.

The device of introducing a new figure by means of his speech is very typical of Dante. The figure resembles one of Dante’s comic types -- he is very straightforward and does not hesitate to confess to Peter the reasons for their unhappiness in heaven. This new journey companion becomes a spokesman for the Victorian view of human work, and, therefore, of Carlyle’s philosophy; his speech to Peter is an hymn to earthly activities and physical life rather than the deceitful belief in the joy of the afterlife inculcated by the Church. As a matter of fact, Hell, as depicted by the new deuteragonist, is another image of earth, or what Dante would have defined as a picture of earth *sub specie aeternitatis*. The garrulous spirit explains that man cannot be happy in a Heaven where everything is governed by the same immutable law of stability and timelessness, because man is ‘a creature of progression’ (p. 33), both cause and effect, actor and victim of the whirlwind of change swallowing up every element of nature. Man cannot dwell in a world that abjures the Heraclitean principle of *pantha rei*, nor can he tolerate a form of existence that fuses nature’s opposites and motley shapes into an unchanging and aeonian mould. The spirit’s protest sounds like a verbose tirade of one of Beckett’s characters -- ‘Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful’.²⁹

Indeed a pre-existentialist air pervades the whole place. Peter’s companion calls it ‘artificial’, smelling ‘of pasteboard and theatricals’, so much so that ‘The very bees/ Seem but to buzz a part’ and ‘Birds, ill at ease,/ Sing as if they sung for hire’

²⁸ ‘The New Inferno’, in *The New Jerusalem and Other Poems*, pp. 28-48 (p. 30). Further quotations are from this edition and indicated by page number in the body of the text.

²⁹ Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), p. 41.

(p. 34). To the 'aeons of eternity' and the prospect of a 'calm, listless life' (p. 32) he opposes the image of a world in which natural seasons alternate and 'Labour and rest, and joy and sorrowing' (p. 34) are conjoined realities. Ultimately, the spirit suggests that a world without death is a world without life. This cyclic vision of life whereby death is an inherent part of the universal process is antipodal with Thomson's nihilism.

'That's enough talk', Peter seems to say to his partner, and the two of them embark on the journey to the New Inferno. From this moment onwards, the poem's essential dynamic principle is a thematic and linguistic paradox. What one would conventionally expect to find and hear in Hell is totally reversed by the poet, so that the two pilgrims speak of hope, whereas they should speak of despair, and their departure from Heaven represents a deep relief, while it should have caused utter distress. Paradoxically, Heaven is seen by them as a stifling prison-house from which to flee; on the other hand, Hell is described as an open space, the expanse 'outside' (p. 38) Heaven. In particular, it is compared with a city at dusk, when one perceives the presence of the town by the artificial lights projected in the sky. Geddes offers an example of urban poetry in the following lines:

A halo seen -- they judged Hell near, as one may know
The presence of a city by the gleam and glow
Cast on the evening sky. (p. 38)

After focusing on the visual effects, the poet goes on to describe the sounds characterising the place. He does not banish the traditional noises associated with Hell, such as the 'low murmuring sounds', the 'deep grumbling groans', and the 'shrilly sounding shrieks' (p. 39), but he bestows on them an unusual positiveness, which depends on their being the antithesis of Heaven's asphyxiating stillness. Through the persona of Peter's comrade, Geddes pronounces his anti-Kailyard and anti-sentimental belief in the poetic value of cityscape and human toil. The spirit's words are also his own words when he says:

Sweeter to me than all the melody of Heaven,
 The music of the winds, the song of nightingales,
 Is this harsh dissonance. (p. 39)

Geddes re-interprets and reverses the literary canon also by changing the external features of the entrance to Hell. The traditionally threatening engraving on the infernal door -- 'All ye who enter here abandon Hope' -- has fallen apart, and only the last word can now be deciphered, so that the original meaning of the inscription is totally overturned. The image of the ruined door calls to mind the episode of the armed angel in Thomson's *The City of Dreadful Night*, who disintegrates under the annihilating eyes of the Sphinx. But whereas Thomson's ruined angel represents the death of hope, Geddes's fallen inscription is a symbol of the persistence of hope. These two opposite pictures alone can be seen as an iconographic expression of two antithetical reactions to the flaws and failures of Victorian society.

Peter notices another remarkable difference between Heaven and Hell. Whereas in the New Jerusalem the position and distribution of the saints were decreed by a systematic and established bureaucracy, the inhabitants of the New Inferno benefit from total freedom of movement and each of them is the master of his own thoughts and deeds. In short, the two realms stand for two opposite kinds of society: one which is based on an authoritative central government, and one which lacks a focal body politic at all. Hell is an anarchic radical world diametrically opposed to the totalitarian and conservative structure of the heavenly city. If Hell is also an image of the modern industrial city, it may be seen as a poetic projection of radical Dundee contrasting with the more conservative Scottish towns.

Indeed the New Inferno does represent the Victorian city, and Geddes takes upon himself the task of showing that the urban setting has 'beauties of its own' (p. 42), following up the Alexander Smith of *City Poems* (1857), and pointing to the direction of later Scottish writers, such as, for example, William McIlvanney and Edwin Morgan. As McIlvanney wrote in 'Dreaming', the urban landscape can be a source of poetic inspiration; Sammy, the protagonist of the story, roaming around

the city, is identified with a poet, 'transforming life into bright colours wherever he touched it'.³⁰ Sammy's vision of the city could well be pathetic fallacy, but Geddes avoids this risk by pointing out the objective visible beauties of his symbolic Inferno. In the persona of the narrator, he focuses on the poetic aspects of the place:

[...] The light which here prevailed,
 Not that of day, but somewhat like what men may see
 When day declines, when Sol's bright beams have failed,
 And Luna for a short but glorious regency
 Rules in the sky [...]
 [...] The air,
 Too, had its properties. Unlike the air of Heaven,
 'Twas bracing -- purging from their frames the leaven
 Of heavenly soporific influences. (p. 42)

It should not surprise us that Geddes's language and tone in 'The New Inferno' lose the stinging sarcasm and irony pervading the previous poem. Nonetheless, he retains his humour and deploys it especially in the episode in which Peter and his companion encounter an aborigine who introduces himself as the 'spiritual walker' (p. 43) of the place, a sort of cicerone whose duty is to conduct the new visitors throughout the infernal city. In fact, this odd personage is the Prince of Lies himself, the Fallen Angel. He is another Devil-figure of Scottish literature, in particular an eccentric version of Satan, owing his burlesque attributes to the Scottish comic tradition. It may be of interest to notice that in the episode of Mephistopheles Geddes makes use of some Scots expressions, such as the assertive 'Aye' pronounced by Satan himself. Does he mean to create a Scottish context? Geddes's Devil is a parody of Gil-Martin, since, despite 'traces of lost majesty', all his frightening powers have been belittled, and his once terrifying appearance has turned into an air of 'low infernal shabbiness' (p. 43). As Samson lost power once

³⁰ William McIlvanney, 'Dreaming', in *Walking Wounded* (Kent: Hodder and Stoughton, 1993), pp. 163-175 (p. 173).

his hair was cut, similarly, Satan's supernatural might disappeared as soon as he was deprived of his horns and cloven foot. At the same time, he is a lampoon of Dante's austere spiritual guides, Virgil in Hell and Beatrice in Heaven. The author's sympathy for this humbled figure shows itself through the concerned attitude of the two saints. He is certainly of the Devil's party, like Milton, but deliberately and consciously.

Behind this character, there are underlying references to other traditions than Scottish comic poetry. Blake and Milton are obvious literary parallels, although the Satan of the *New Inferno* is not a Prometheus-like figure. He is eccentric and other not by choice but because he was ordered to be so. Whereas the Romantic figure of Satan is a rebel by nature, and his creators insist on his unremitting revolt against God, Geddes's devil is a more human and easily persuaded personage. The person who convinced him to give up his traditional role of soul torturer was Milton himself, who is one of the denizens of the *New Inferno*. The eminent poet hit the nail on the head when he proved to Satan that his apparent rebelliousness to God by perpetrating violence against the damned was merely an illusion. His punishing methods were part of a divine scheme, and, by applying them, he was simply proclaiming his own servitude to God. Hence he gave up his authority in hell, and since then, each spirit has acted according to his own deliberations. Geddes retains from Milton the image of a monarchic heaven opposed to that of an anti-establishment Satan, but then he applies the idea of individual radicalism to a whole community, so much so that the Devil's individuality itself does not stand anymore on its own but becomes one with the identity of the whole infernal community -- he has a job to do, as any other ordinary or extraordinary inhabitant of hell.

In 1890 William Morris's *News From Nowhere* took Victorian society aback. The similarities between this work and Geddes's 'The New Inferno' are striking, especially as regards the political implications hidden behind the narrative structure. 'Nowhere' resembles the 'New Inferno' in that it is a realm without a centralised government, in which individual communities can freely run their affairs. Both writers adopt individual strategies to sugar their didactic pill. Their aim is to unveil the cracks of Victorian society hidden under the mask of hypocrisy, and both of them

make use of indirect methods to achieve it. Morris exploits the possibilities of the mythical tale and pastoral romance. Superficially, his work belongs to escapist literature, but on a deeper level, it is a critique of the present time, and the pastoral nostalgia is ultimately a symbolic device which Morris employs to express man's need of a new sustainable relationship with nature. On the other hand, in 'The New Inferno' Geddes prefers to make use of anti-pastoral techniques, and to apply his personal versions of the visionary and allegorical mode. Pastoral stereotypes appear in 'The New Jerusalem' but only to be re-interpreted as negative and deceptive conventions.

Morris's Nowhere is an Utopia. What about the New Inferno? It is not certainly a 'city of dreadful night', since it encompasses hope and peculiar beauties. Therefore, it is not a dystopian land, indeed the pilgrims find it more desirable than heaven. On the other hand, it is too close to the real industrial world to be considered an utopian place; since it is the world we live in, it cannot represent something to long for. Nonetheless, the poet reminds us of the poetry of its scenery, which, otherwise, would not be easy to discern. Essentially, Geddes intends to convey the idea that men can find happiness in what they already have, but they need someone or something that can help them to open their eyes and discover beauty where they would never have hoped to find it. The poet and his poetry are the vehicles for this simple and yet extraordinary revelation.

The New Jerusalem and Other Poems includes other poems which address social and political issues by means of a symbolic framework. One of the most significant pieces of the whole volume is 'The Shoreless Sea'. It is essentially a poem on individual freedom. On the literal level, the poem depicts the figure of a man leaving his homeland and his family to sail in the open sea. His parents try to persuade him to sail in the 'good old ship Conformity',³¹ but he chooses instead an anonymous ship. Whenever he looks back, the familiar land tempts him to give up his voyage, but his Ulysses-like determination wins over any such temptation. It is

³¹ 'The Shoreless Sea', in *The New Jerusalem and Other Poems*, pp. 51-53 (p. 51).

evident that the journey in the shoreless sea is a metaphor for freedom, opposed to the geographical confinement and clearly delimited shapes of his country -- 'the shallows by the strand,/ The hidden rocks, the shifting sand', 'the sunny isles' (pp. 52, 53). But what kind of freedom is he looking for?

First, spiritual and intellectual freedom in its most general sense. He wants to discover by himself what price man must pay for his absolute freedom, and also put to the test his own human possibilities. The shoreless sea in this case is a metaphor for an utopian space where human knowledge is not restricted by any external impositions and preconceptions. The immediate discovery of such an enterprise is that 'There is an affright in feeling free,/ And a dread restraint in liberty' (p. 52). His parents had warned him against the dangers of a life without sheltering principles and authorities, but he would not listen to them, and, even if the choice of freedom often implies a sense of loneliness and non-belonging, he decides to pursue it. The second discovery is that absolute knowledge is unattainable, which is summed up by the Socratic truth that 'Man knows the less as the more he knows' (p. 53). In a sense, man's total freedom will always be hindered by his limits; he will always be trapped in his human imperfection.

Secondly, the sailor is an Ishmael-figure in search for freedom from the religious orthodoxy of his country. The symbolism throughout is reminiscent of that of *Moby Dick*. He refuses to sail on the ship 'Conformity' and would rather travel on a ship without a name. The symbols are clear: the wanderer is an alter-ego of the poet himself who rebels against a dogmatic and systematic form of religion (here called 'Conformity'), and chooses instead an individualised, personal faith which cannot be identified with any specific creed. There is also an implied generation conflict: the nonconformist son repudiates the religion of his parents. He does not become atheist; conversely he looks for a more direct way to communicate with God, and establish an individual relationship with the divinity. The shoreless sea

might also be a figurative image of God's infinity, of which man is a microscopic part; in Leopardian terms, a sea in which 'sweet it seems to shipwreck'.³²

Finally, the navigator is running away from the political system of his country. The Utopia he is pursuing is a land free from political constitution and hierarchy, where the laws are only those which each individual freely establishes for himself. The shoreless sea is thus also the symbol of an anarchic world, certainly storing dangerous storms, yet more desirable than a totalitarian system. In other words, the whole representation echoes the antithesis between the New Inferno and the New Jerusalem. Geddes's sea is one of doubt, but, contrary to similar representations in contemporary poems, such as Arnold's 'Dover Beach' and Tennyson's 'In Memoriam', the lack of faith does not imply utter spiritual darkness but a positive search for alternative forms of belief.

The poem is particularly striking for the frequent and effective use of many figures of speech, such as alliteration, assonance and internal rhyme. The quatrains of heroic couplets determine the rapid rhythm of the poem, and reflect the dynamism of the voyage towards the shoreless sea. It is certainly one of Geddes's most Romantic poems -- in a post-Byronic manner -- in which Romantic imagery is used as a vehicle for social and cultural comment. In addition, the poem incorporates several echoes of George MacDonald's *A Story of the Sea Shore*, a narrative poem about parting, madness and suicide. The sea is here described as 'A featureless, a half re-molten world,/ Half-way to the Unseen';³³ its featurelessness is very similar to the absolute openness of the sea in Geddes's poem, but there is a gothic and dark side in MacDonald's image of the sea, which corresponds to the externalisation of the fear and anxiety of the female protagonist. At some point, the sea turns into a Satanic form, into the monster which swallowed the sailor she loved. On the other hand, Geddes's shoreless sea, however overwhelming because of its infinitude, is

³² The actual line from 'The Infinite' reads: 'And sweet to me is shipwreck in this sea'. See Giacomo Leopardi, 'The Infinite', in *The Poems of Leopardi*, ed. and trans. by Geoffrey L. Bickersteth (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1923), pp. 208-209 (p. 209).

³³ George MacDonald, 'A Story of the Sea Shore', in *A Hidden Life* (London: Longman, Roberts & Green, 1864), pp. 195-216 (p. 205).

never a sinister icon or a symbol of evil. The two seas are two different pictures of the sublime.

'The Shoreless Sea' is followed by a range of poems diverse in both themes and metrical forms. The sequence of poems does not seem to be dictated by any logical principle, but succeed each other rather at random, at least till the group of sonnets. The miscellaneous pieces include a poem on the stagnation of poetic creativity ('The Poet'), a gothic ballad with Calvinistic resonances ('The Sun Will Bring it to the Light'), a song-lyric where Geddes pronounces his 'defence of poetry' and of the class of poets ('A Proposal'), a satirical flyting on the vanity of success ('Success'), immediately followed by another flyting between an orthodox believer and a free thinker ('Help Thou Mine Unbelief'), and a more conventional religious poem ('The Dawning Day').

'Help Thou Mine Unbelief' forms a triad with two other poems on similar themes: 'Blackie and Birds' and 'At His Grave'. They develop one of the central themes of 'The Shoreless Sea': the objection to any form of systematic creed. 'Help Thou Mine Unbelief' is a satirical poem in which an ironical 'I' pretends to agree with a speechless 'You' about the comfort and security represented by his religious creed. In the end, his farcical attitude is replaced by a more poignant criticism of the hypocrisy and falsity of that creed, and reaches a climax when he compares the blind believer to an ostrich which hides its head in the sand. The title 'Blackie and Birds' refers mockingly to Prof. Blackie's poem 'Creed and Canaries', in which Blackie compares those who profess a creed with canaries safely sheltered by their cages against external dangers. Blackie's ideas mirror those of the voyager's parents in 'The Shoreless Sea'. In his invective, the poet makes use of the metaphor coined by Blackie, and then turns it against him: the canaries are trapped and not protected in their cages; likewise, the believers are suffocated rather than supported by the dogmatism of orthodox religion. 'At His Grave' is a memorial poem dedicated to the late Reverend John Wallace, the minister of Lindsay Street Congregational Church. The poet praises him for being one of those men

That out on an unfathomed sea,

With God alone for company;
Sound depths beyond a common ken.³⁴

The clergyman is an alter-ego of the Ishmael-figure in 'The Shoreless Sea', another exemplification of someone who is not blinded by the accepted dogmas but sees the relationship with God as a solitary and extraordinary experience.

The group of sonnets includes seven pieces. The first four sonnets form a sequence which Geddes entitled 'A Trinity', since three of them are devoted each to a different writer and the fourth brings them all together. The eponymous protagonist of the first sonnet is Carlyle, introduced by the poet as

One who has turned his face towards the west,
From out a world in darkness and decay,
To chant the splendours of a sunken day.³⁵

'The west' is both a literal allusion to Western civilisation, which Carlyle absorbed and wedded with his Scottish heritage, and a metaphor expanded in the following lines, where Carlyle is described as 'A soul too darkly shadowed by the night', and averting his face from the rising sun. Even if oppressed by the present, Carlyle turns to the past in order to dig out of it the light to illuminate the present, 'To search in sepulchres with tireless zest' (p. 80). Geddes admired Carlyle but could not totally approve of his looking backward to the past. The underlying message is that there are other ways of coping with the burden of present times than turning to past glories or Golden Ages, but the poet does not say what they are.

The second sonnet centres on the same theme but this time the protagonist is Tennyson. He is described by the poet as a 'milder'³⁶ spirit than Carlyle but equally looking to the past as a glorious age which will never come back. By commenting that the beauty of past times is only a reflection of Tennyson's age, Geddes suggests

³⁴ 'At His Grave', in *The New Jerusalem and Other Poems*, pp. 69-71 (p. 71).

³⁵ 'Carlyle', in *The New Jerusalem and Other Poems*, p. 80.

³⁶ 'Tennyson', in *The New Jerusalem and Other Poems*, p. 81.

that Tennyson was captured by a form of pathetic fallacy and *Verfremdungseffekt*: the beauty he sees in the past does not belong to the past itself but is a retrospective projection of the poet's ideal of beauty and of his nostalgia for ages gone by. Once again Geddes expresses an indirect defence of his own time against sentimental and escapist attitudes. The third sonnet focuses on another kind of poetry, and Geddes sees Emerson as its exemplary representative. He refers to the transcendentalist tradition and to the poetry related to it, which is neither concerned with the past nor with the present but deals with hopes and prophetic expectations of future happiness.

Finally, Geddes sums up and clearly expresses his own ideas in the fourth poem, significantly entitled 'All'. He identifies each poet with a specific mood which every man experiences sooner or later in his life. Therefore 'All' stands both for the three poets now re-introduced all together and for all mankind. Like Carlyle, we *all* feel sometimes 'doubt and dread of all mortality'; like Tennyson, we *all* turn 'lustful glances backwards on the rude barbaric days', and like Emerson, we *all* look 'forward to futurity/To hope and trust, yet somewhat doubtingly'.³⁷ Yet he concludes that we should experience these moods only temporarily while being constantly aware of our present life and trying to make the most of it. To 'seize the present as our dower' and 'fill each fleeting hour' is the poet's ultimate message to his readership, which also means that happiness and glory do not belong exclusively to the past but are ingrained in the present, too. We are blinded by material preoccupations and cannot perceive them, but future generations will maybe refer to our age as 'The glorious past' (p. 83).

The two following sonnets of the volume are linked by a recurrent leitmotif in Geddes's works, that is, the universalistic vision of humanity as a syncretic and heterogeneous community, which strongly contrasts with the racist and elitist conceptions of the age. The first sonnet, 'Race', starts off with the poet's cry against the contemporary debates and diatribes about race. His protest is loud and open, 'O! how I hate this noisy cry of race',³⁸ and he expressly advances a claim against the widespread Darwinian notion of man's superiority over all other species. Apart from

³⁷ 'All', in *The New Jerusalem and Other Poems*, p. 83.

³⁸ 'Race', in *The New Jerusalem and Other Poems*, p. 84.

post-Darwinian polemic, the period saw also the creation of new racial theories and biased ideas on the irreligious life of the poor and the 'savage'. Class and race prejudices were some of the most obnoxious consequences of imperialism and industrialisation. To the image of a fragmented human society based on clashing creeds and ideologies Geddes opposes that of a concordant 'common band' of individuals guided by no dogmas but only by their common belief in human sympathy.

The following sonnet pursues this issue, but the emphasis this time is on religious fanaticism and obscurantism. The poem is entitled 'Calvin', but Calvin is never mentioned by name in it. Geddes refers to him as a 'he' who did not truly love men but only his creed. Calvin is the prototype of the 'system builders' deprecated by the poet, a man of the brain and not of the heart who thought it possible to 'compress within a compact creed/ God and the universe'.³⁹ There is an underlying echo of previous poems, such as 'The Shoreless Sea' and 'Blackie and Birds', in which the idea of compression and enclosure was encapsulated respectively in the metaphor of the old ship and the cage.

The last sonnet epitomises one of the themes of 'The New Inferno', but in a mellower and loftier tone. The 'dead leaves' of the title are an image of death but simultaneously they still hold in them the seed of life since they will soon turn into humus, and allow new lives to grow. The central theme is the endless cycle of life and death which affects all nature, whereby death is seen as part of universal life itself. The poet defines life as 'a ceaseless efforting to bring forth death',⁴⁰ which superficially seems to be a nihilistic idea in tune with James Thomson's gloomy vision of universal life. In fact, there is an essential difference between the two views: death is the access to nothingness for Thomson, whereas Geddes conceives death and life as two inter-dependent and alternatively recurrent stages of the wheel of destiny, so that the death of something or someone can be seen as the beginning of a new life. This image of life and death repeating themselves in endless cycle contains a religious element, a peculiar form of mysticism which contrasts with

³⁹ 'Calvin', in *The New Jerusalem and Other Poems*, p. 85.

⁴⁰ 'Dead Leaves', in *The New Jerusalem and Other Poems*, p. 86.

Christian orthodoxy and corresponds to the poet's personal interpretation of nature's spiritual life.

The sonnets are followed by the poem entitled 'The Gospel of Taste', in which Geddes reveals more openly his rebellion against the established Church. It is a satirical poem in heroic couplets with a powerful ironic vein running throughout it. The speaking voice is a collective 'we', possibly the voice of the religious community, which comments on the dying out of the old type of religion based on small congregations, and its replacement with a Church system which has stipulated a covenant with Mammon. Nonetheless, the poet identifies with this voice and turns it into a channel to express his own views. The butt of Geddes's satire is a pastor whose manners and Tartufian sermons resemble the speech and attitude of a sophist. Here is how the poet portrays him:

Possessed of good manners, and very refined,
He can qualify truths for the popular mind.
Of fashionable wants he knows all the phases,
A master of finished and elegant phrases.⁴¹

He can manipulate his audience by exploiting their ignorance and playing the part of a religious demagogue. Geddes's tone becomes sarcastic when he writes that

His sermons for most part are like those of others,
With very deep thinking he seldom us bothers.
Cheating or knavery, or lying in trade,
To these, for good reasons, no reference is made. (p. 93)

'Good reasons' does not mean good purposes here, but is a hint at the hypocrisy and dishonesty of the Church hierarchy. Satire and sarcasm culminate in the last bitter

⁴¹ 'The Gospel of Taste', in *The New Jerusalem and Other Poems*, pp. 87-96 (p. 92).

sentence of the poem: 'When this gospel is preached for better or worse,/ Salvation depends on the length of the purse' (p. 96).

The New Jerusalem and Other Poems include also a few poems in Scots on various themes. The vernacular used by Geddes is not restricted to the district of Dundee but is very much a continuation of the peculiar kind of Scots adopted by Hogg in poems such as 'Kilmeny', and, later on, by MacDiarmid in his less strictly vernacular pieces. The basic skeleton is that of the English language but clothed with a thick garland of Scots phrases and expressions. The themes of the poems range from the legendary and supernatural of 'Pygmalion' and 'The Water-Kelpie' to the religious satire of 'Oor Holy Fair'.

The variety comprises a couple of poems which deal with Biblical characters and events in a parodic and comic style. The second of these poems, called 'Oor First Parents', in which the poet compares the love between Adam and Eve with his own love for Jean, has a distinctly Burnsian comic quality. The Scots poems are significant examples of Geddes's practice of reductive idiom, in particular when he deals with religious and Biblical subjects. 'On Balaam's Ass' is, in this respect, the most illustrative of these examples. Arthur Clough made use of the 'Balaam's Ass' figure in *Dipsychus*, published several years before Geddes's poem.⁴² The parallel may be purely coincidental, but it adds a significant detail to the already mentioned affinities between the two poets. The story of Balaam is taken from the Bible (Numbers 22,1-24,15). Balac, King of Moab, calls the wizard Balaam to curse the people of Israel, but Balaam, despite his hatred for Israel, refuses to go because he cannot disobey his God. Finally, God gives him permission to follow Balac's princes and go to his kingdom. He is taken there by his donkey which, during the journey, can see what Balaam cannot see, that is, the armed Angel of God trying to stop him. Balaam hits the donkey several times because it keeps on deviating from the main path, totally unaware that it is in fact trying to save him from the blows of the Angel.

⁴² *Dipsychus* was first published in *Letters and Remains of Arthur Hugh Clough* in 1865, and was later included in the collected editions of 1869 and thereafter. See *The Poems of Arthur Clough*, ed. by A. L. P. Norrington (London; New York; Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 309n.

Only after the donkey voices his protest against his violence, can Balaam see the Angel, and he eventually yields to his command, which is to bless rather than curse the people of Israel.

The poem's symbolism is open to various interpretations. The poet sets himself in opposition to other bards who deal with 'nobler themes' than his own, while his intention is just to 'scribble twa three rhymes/ On Balaam's ass'.⁴³ He wonders what happened to the ass after the episode narrated in the Bible, and he conjectures that it may have spent its last days 'tae pu' the thistle' or 'to trace/ Some cart or barrow' (p. 135). There are no records which can tell us the truth, but maybe some day its bones will be discovered by some explorers, which will prove that it existed and stop 'The intellectual clish-ma-claver,/ O' them wha ca' the tale a haver' (p. 136). The ass which would not proceed straight along the road is a metaphorical image of the individual who does not walk with conviction and security on the path of faith but is subject to hesitations and various deflections from the main road.

In other words, the ass personifies people like the author, who swerve from the official cultural and religious stream, overwhelmed by doubt over the unquestionable truth of orthodox faith. Yet the ass can also be a metaphor for Scotland in general, and, in this case, Balaam would represent the dominant culture of England.⁴⁴ If one accepts this second interpretation, the poem becomes loaded with a political overtone which would certainly confirm MacDiarmid's unacknowledged indebtedness to Geddes. Personally, I do not find this version very convincing, because it would imply a strong expression of anger for the Union of 1707 by means of a violent image such as that of the ass/Scotland being ill-treated by the rider/England. Even if Geddes, because of his radicalism and unorthodoxy, breached the Anglicised Scottish tradition and indicated a way which was later undertaken by national and nationalistic writers, he never expressed anti-Unionist thoughts. His protest was rather against the parochialism and conservatism of his own district and, in a larger perspective, of the whole country. Hence Balaam can be seen as the poetic persona of an orthodox minister who perpetuates a form of

⁴³ 'On Balaam's Ass', in *The New Jerusalem and Other Poems*, pp. 134-136 (p. 134).

⁴⁴ See Valentina Bold, pp. 21-22.

psychological violence on his community by inculcating in their souls a strict and entrapping dogmatism.

Geddes lived in a period of great religious ferment, of many debates and controversies on spiritual and ecclesiastical matters, and his works reflect the general anxiety of the age as well as his personal response to it. *The New Jerusalem and Other Poems* starts with a poem which questions the tenets of the established Church and finishes with a poem which similarly attacks religious pharisaism. Both the title, 'The Second Advent', and the visionary quality of the poem look forward to Yeats's later poem 'The Second Coming'. Both poems are written in Miltonic blank verse, and they are visions of a forthcoming era conveying a sense of initial hope, later replaced by negative images. Geddes's poem does not present the apocalyptic atmosphere of its modernist counterpart, but its conclusion is certainly as shocking for the reader. The central theme is that of Christ's return to earth and the reaction of mankind to the marvellous event. From the very beginning, the events are clearly set in contemporary Scotland. The Church ministers expect the new advent to bring about miraculous consequences, such as their social and economic transformation, while common men wait in anxiety for Christ's manifestation of his supernatural powers. The preparation of the welcoming festival is described by Geddes in half-humorous, half-sarcastic terms. All expectations are frustrated, because Christ comes back with no other purpose than to preach exactly what he had preached before. In fact, he re-enacts his defence of the people, of the wretched and weak, and his attack against religious and political pharisees.

In his sermon Christ, suggests that man should re-establish a closer relationship with nature, as it is the best temple where God reveals himself. His words and gestures immediately set him apart from the establishment: he embodies the democratic, anti-utilitarian spirit which rebels against the totalitarian, elitist dogmas of society. He is related to the inhabitants of Morris's 'Nowhere', since he shares with them the idea of a world without central systems, where each individual is free to profess his own personal faith, whatever its form and name. At some point, Christ is visited by a young man who expresses his scepticism towards the 'algebraic

rules'⁴⁵ on which the established creed is based, doubtful that God can be compressed into its compact system. Obviously, this character is another alter-ego of the poet himself, his voice echoing ideas expressed in previous poems. Christ's answer to all his questions is a vindication of spiritual and intellectual freedom against those who long 'to localise the Deity' and assign a name to it. 'The Father's arms are wider than ye wot' (p. 152), he says to the sceptic, thus proclaiming the universalistic and syncretic value of faith, and the inanity of any attempt to pin it down to a specific doctrine or nomenclature.

The shocking finale is that the members of the Sanhedrin put Christ on trial once again, and unanimously decide upon his execution. The anachronism is deliberate and indeed very effective. The underlying implication is that Christ is perpetually executed by rigorous and hidebound orthodoxy, and violence is perpetuated every time that man is denied the expression of his spiritual freedom. Furthermore, the second innuendo is that true and sincere religion is killed by a corrupt and degenerate ecclesiastical class, which has yielded to the temptations of Mammon and to the dreary pragmatism of the industrial era.

Geddes's second volume of poems appeared in 1886 under the title *The Spectre Clock of Alyth and Other Selections*. The author's concern with local issues and debates is not only suggested by the title but also by his own words in the preface. Here he addresses an apology to Alyth's community for his at times bitter remarks on its backwardness, and emphasises that, although he acknowledges the progressive steps which have been already undertaken, his intention is 'to urge them to move still faster on the path of reform'.⁴⁶ His radical spirit comes to the fore here, and indeed it stands out in the whole collection. The volume is divided into two parts of almost identical size, and it is especially in the first half -- significantly called

⁴⁵ 'The Second Advent', in *The New Jerusalem and Other Poems*, pp. 139-159 (p. 150).

⁴⁶ 'Preface' to *The Spectre Alyth and Other Selections* (Alyth: Thomas M'Murray, 1886), unnumbered page. Further references to the poems from this volume are from this edition, and, after the first reference, indicated in the body of the text by page number.

'Prose and Poetry Relating to Alyth and Neighbourhood' -- that Geddes focuses on local themes. The second section is entitled 'Miscellaneous Poems'; the poet here turns his eyes from his native district towards more diverse settings and subjects. Nevertheless, this division is not so rigid as it seems. A universal significance is often embedded in Geddes's local themes and imagery, and, vice versa, underlying allusions to community affairs are pervasive in poems addressing more general issues. The local, the national and the universal are constant, often coexistent, dimensions in Geddes's work. Owing to the copious content of the volume, I will only analyse the most conspicuous texts.

The poem entitled 'The Spectre Clock of Alyth' is preceded by a prose piece which serves as an introduction to the poem by expounding its central argument: whether or not to repair the steeple clock of Alyth. After discussing the pros and cons of such an initiative, the Elders of the town decide to appoint a Committee to calculate the actual cost of the enterprise, and then decide if the financial burden is worth undertaking. The poem opens with the image of the old church -- a symbolic bulwark suggestive of the past and history -- almost personified by the poet when he refers to its 'quaint sacerdotal dignity'.⁴⁷ What is unusual about the church is the contrast between the hoary air surrounding it, due to its age, and the grotesquerie of its present appearance because of the ruinous condition of the steeple. The author refers to the legend that there once used to be a clock in the lower part of the steeple but meteorological agents and 'unregarding fowls of air' have reduced it to a fragmented, almost unrecognisable shape, in fact to 'the ghost of what it was' (p. 13). In an aside, the poet admits that he cannot say whether the legend is true or false -- a mystery looking forward to the supernatural introduced in a later passage. Being a spectre of a clock, it can now only fulfil its functions 'in spectral ways' and give out odd sounds, which are compared with the 'tremulous tinkling of fairy bells', repellent and attractive at the same time (p. 13). To describe that sound, the poet adopts an adjective recurrent in traditional ballads: 'Gruesome' (p. 13). The poem

⁴⁷ 'The Spectre Clock of Alyth', in *The Spectre Alyth and Other Selections*, pp. 12-15 (p. 12).

has indeed something of the aura of a ballad, but it is written in heroic couplets, which is a metre generally used in satirical poetry.

The ghastly and ghostly appearance of the clock produces an appalling effect on Alyth's inhabitants. Like Joyce's Dubliners, they become victims of spiritual paralysis, and their sluggishness is reflected in their Munch-like faces, in their 'dulled eyes' and 'clogged ears', and also in their 'phantasmagoric' movements (p. 14). Responsibility is attributed to 'the Power which retribution brings/ To wait in the wake of neglected things' (p. 14), which is another name for the Elders, the authorities of Alyth whose conservative views hinder the development and improvement of the community. The phantom clock and its hypnotising chimes have the power 'To benumb with the clock paralysis' (p. 14), so that the clock becomes the symbol of Alyth's inhabitants, of their parochial backwardness and inability to make reforms to keep up with the pace of universal progress. Geddes refers here especially to the civic problems of the little town, to the necessity to improve the general public condition, which he faced personally as a member of the Town Council and Bailie of Alyth.

In the last four stanzas, the poem becomes visionary. The narrator predicts the arrival of 'the gifted One' (p. 14), a 'Conqueror' (p. 15) who will liberate the community from the cursed influence of the clock by putting it back in regular motion. He will awake them from their lethargy and instil new energy into their veins, so that they will stand up and cry in astonishment, "'Tis the end of the nineteenth century' (p. 14). In short, this unidentified Conqueror will act as catalyst by kindling their dozy souls and making them aware of the historical moment in which they are living. The century is approaching its end, and it is time the Alyth community began to look around and take the necessary steps to overcome its slothfulness. This is the message that the 'gifted One' will bring them. In a sense, there is an echo here of 'The Second Advent', but the reformer is not called Christ, and his identity remains obscure to us till the very end. It can be conjectured that he is the personification of a new stirring force which will affect the life of Alyth, or of a radical spirit which will stand up to and defeat the reactionary tendency of the town Elders. Nonetheless, he could also be the prefiguration of a real individual, either

clerical or lay, who will bring about revolutionary changes in the stagnant community. Finally, there are reasons to hypothesise that this neo-Messiah is the poet's self-projection, since both his literary works and his civic engagement clearly testify to his intent to promote a political and cultural renaissance of his country, both on a regional and national scale.

Geddes often displays an egotistical component which is simultaneously three different things: a post-Romantic, in particular post-Shelleyan belief in the leading role of the poet; a personal interpretation of Carlyle's image of the poet-hero; and an early version of the Nietzschean echoes of MacDiarmid's works. The identification of the Conqueror with the author himself is also substantiated by the peculiar style he adopts. His speech is like that of an orator, marked by a rhetorical, at times bombastic, style. However, the protagonist of the poem is the clock.

James Thomson availed himself of a similar metaphor in *The City of Dreadful Night* to convey the sense of spiritual void he perceived both inside and outside himself:

When Faith and Love and Hope are dead indeed,
Can Life still live? By what doth it proceed?

As whom his one intense thought overpowers,
He answered coldly, Take a watch, erase
The signs and figures of the circling hours,
Detach the hands, remove the dial-face;
The works proceed until run down; although
Bereft of purpose, void of use, still go.⁴⁸

The essential difference between the two metaphors depends on the general difference between Thomson's and Geddes's thoughts. The clock of Alyth will someday resume its functions; thus, there is hope of a re-awakening at the end of

⁴⁸ James Thomson, *The City of Dreadful Night*, II. 29.

poem. On the other hand, the paralysed clock in Thomson's poem is a fixed, never-changing metaphor of a hopeless condition, or of the poet's gloomy vision of modern life as a perpetual lethargic state. Thomson's clock is the pictorial image of a world-Limbo where waiting has no sense anymore, whereas Geddes's clock symbolises a human community in a temporary Limbo state, waiting for an innovative force to awaken them from their sleep.

Clock imagery recurs in the poem 'A Work of Art'. Yet this time the poet deals with a functioning clock, which he opposes to the romantic picture of a grocer's almanac; both the clock and the almanac hang side by side on the wall of the protagonist's apartment. The clock is always a negative symbol; in this case, it stands for an inimical presence continuously defying the protagonist's reverie about the almanac's landscape decorations. Here is how he describes one of these interruptions:

(Kitchen clock -- dull, boorish, rude --
Breaks in with an interlude,
Palpable, obtrusive, gross,
But my eyes are on the floss,
Where the rushing river darts
Down the mountains of the Hartz.)⁴⁹

The clock's chimes awaken the poet from his day-dreaming, calling him back to reality; hence the clock is described as

[...] dull embodiment
Of a world indifferent
To the tide of beauty verging,
Laping, laving, and submerging
The bare margins of the real .

⁴⁹ 'A Work of Art', in *The Spectre Clock of Alyth and Other Selections*, pp. 36-40 (p. 39).

In a flood of the ideal. (p. 40)

The argument about the repair of the clock of Alyth is also at the centre of 'The Steeple Starlings', a short story subtitled 'A Modern Fable'. It is the last prose contribution to the volume, although not the last piece characterised by prosaic discourse. 'The Steeple Starlings' is a modern fabliau, in the tradition of Aesop, La Fontaine, or, to remain within the Scottish scene, Henryson and Burns. The starlings stand for the Elders, or for the conservative party of the town, who object to the mending of the steeple, since it would entail the destruction of their nests -- another symbol of old traditions. They deprecate the 'foreigner'⁵⁰ who raised the issue and put their life at risk. The foreigner and the Conqueror of the previous poem are the same person; the predicted advent has already occurred here, and the foreigner dog in the manger might well be the Dundee radical recently arrived in Alyth. After controversial discussions, the starlings decide to leave the steeple and emigrate in the direction of Kirriemuir and Forfar. That Kirriemuir was Barrie's native place may well be relevant. The radical foreigner overlaps with the anti-Kailyard writer who intends to introduce innovative elements in the tradition of Scottish poetry. Having said that, it should also be pointed out that Geddes's attitude towards the traditions and Celtic heritage of Scotland is sometimes ambiguous. This is evidenced, for instance, in the poem entitled 'The Glenisla Gathering'.

Various themes and stylistic devices link 'The Glenisla Gathering' with preceding Scottish poems. The gathering of heterogeneous groups of people to celebrate a particular event is a framework which Burns, Hogg and Tennant adopted in poems, such as 'The Holy Fair', 'The Queen's Wake' and 'Anster Fair'. Like his antecedents, Geddes suggests the dynamism of all the people converging to Glenisla by means of cataloguing: in rhythmically frenzied verses, the narrator lists the places of origin of the participants and the means of transport they used. A rushed rhythm characterises also the description of the athletes, which bears a strong resemblance to one of the episodes in Hogg's *Queen Hynde*. Two antagonistic voices speak in the

⁵⁰ 'The Steeple Starlings', in *The Spectre Alyth and Other Selections*, pp. 15-17 (p. 16).

poem. The Old Inhabitant is the main narrator; he begins his patriotic harangue after being provoked by the Stranger, an alien figure unfamiliar with the traditional gathering. The Old Inhabitant reveals to us the foreigner's origins by calling him contemptuously Sassenach; his attitude is patronising, and his defence of Highland culture is affected by an air of superiority which does not elicit any sympathy for his ideas. His tone becomes sentimental and nostalgic when he stresses the difference between the present event and old traditions: the gathering is after all a form of entertainment organised for the Sassenach, whereas the past festivals were genuine celebrations of a now dying Gaeldom. 'Ichabod!'⁵¹ he cries in the end, suggesting that the glory of the Gaels has departed for ever. His description of the Gael as child of nature is a stereotype which Geddes criticises indirectly in the poem but more expressly in a note, in which he points out that 'old age is naturally inclined to indulge in regrets and to minimise the present by exaggerating the past' (p. 32). Geddes's own position is transparent. Even if he does not sympathise with the Stranger, he does not side with the Old Inhabitant either. His attitude towards the sentimental, Kailyard representation of the Highlands resembles the demythologising picture of Gaelic culture in Clough's *The Bothie of Tober-na-Vuolich* (1848). Being a man of his own time, the romanticisation and idealisation of the past is anathema to Geddes.

It is ironical that a non-Romantic poem like 'The Glenisla Gathering' is preceded by some poems with strong Wordsworthian and Leopardian echoes. Both 'A Summer Holiday' and 'Cutlery Sharpened. Umbrellas Repaired' introduce the figure of a wanderer and son of nature, who keeps himself aloof from human society. The second poem in particular evinces Geddes's concern for simple and common people; the protagonist is a tinker and umbrella repairer who bears a strong similarity with the humble characters in Wordsworth's and Leopardi's poetry. The poet's wonder for the finished work of the artisan is like the child's innocent amazement in front of events, characters, situations which adults would normally treat with indifference. This attitude recalls Giovanni Pascoli's idea that the poet hides a little

⁵¹ 'The Glenisla Gathering', in *The Spectre Alyth and Other Selections*, pp.32-36 (p.36).

child inside his soul, and certainly it looks back also to Rousseau and the Romantic theories drawing on his philosophy.

Other Leopardian echoes characterise the poem entitled 'A Winter Scene'. The poet is the solitary roamer who perceives signs of decay and death all around him, so that the spot looks like 'One vast dread necropolis'.⁵² The winter landscape is gloomy like Thomson's depiction of the scenery around the 'city of dreadful night', yet Geddes's poem is not pessimistic, and the initial sense of withering and lifelessness is finally replaced by the same image of life-death cycle which was at the centre of 'Dead Leaves'. The poet's optimistic vision of life and nature emerges in the following lines:

Under cover white and chill
Nature's great heart beateth still;

Underneath, unseen by me,
There is promise, potency. (p. 26)

Nature becomes a mother-figure in the end, thus suggesting that Geddes's work presents a pantheistic, pseudo-deistic component, a belief in holiness at the heart of nature which provides him with a sort of 'comfort and solace' (p. 26), and therefore also abates the horror of death.

Geddes's defence of humble and wandering spirits recurs in other two poems, 'The People's Theatre' and 'The Tinker'. In the former, the poet sides with the humble actors of the mobile theatre, and takes a position against the utilitarianism and profit making of the middle-class. His anti-philistine stance crops up in the following pungent lines:

And now, good citizen, industrious man,
Who still to scrape and save dost ever plan,

⁵² 'A Winter Scene, in *The Spectre Alyth and Other Selections*, pp. 23-27 (p. 25).

Think not a vagrant and eccentric pen
Should shun the habitats of wandering men.⁵³

Geddes is here offering us a self-portrait. He identifies with the actors because they represent a world apart from the bourgeois cash nexus; they are ex-centric because they are not concerned with the utilitarian priorities of the central establishment. The poem is important especially because it exhibits an ambiguous attitude which is consistent throughout Geddes's work. Even if he admired Carlyle and saw industrial progress and consequent changes as inevitable, Geddes condemned the contemporary work worship when it became absolute and led to the dismissal of creative art as something useless. His invective against the myth of productivity looks forward to some of Bertrand Russell's statements in his book *In Praise of Idleness* (1932). The following words might have been uttered by Geddes himself:

The modern man thinks that everything ought to be done for the sake of something else, and never for its own sake [...] The notion that the desirable activities are those that bring a profit has made everything topsy-turvy.⁵⁴

Geddes is anti-establishment also when he criticises the middle-class's conspicuous consumption by contrasting it with the apparent simplicity of the players, who do not need external paraphernalia but only their inner power to please the spectators.

Another unorthodox figure is the eponymous protagonist of 'The Tinker'. He is another exile from society, a wanderer belonging nowhere, concentrating only on his work and on the mysterious mingling of the sounds emitted by his tools with the surrounding sounds of nature. His indifference to the poet's questions suggests a sort of transcendental air in his demeanour, and indeed there is such a powerful fascination in the tinkling of his instruments that the poet continues to hear it even after he has gone. Like an emotion recollected in tranquillity, that sound comes back

⁵³ 'The People's Theatre', in *The Spectre Alyth and Other Selections*, pp. 41-45 (p. 42).

⁵⁴ Bertrand Russell, *In Praise of Idleness* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1948), p. 24.

to his mind when he ponders on the problems of his time. The tinker enacts a protest against the materialism of the age and, perhaps, against the poet himself, whom the solitary tinker cannot distinguish from the rest of society. Yet the poet feels admiration for him because he does not seem to be affected by the chaos of the world, and, careless of contemporary political and social debates, remains 'tenaciously stuck to his own good place'.⁵⁵ One may find here a second ambiguity on the part of the poet: he is a political activist and yet he praises someone who keeps himself aloof from social affairs. The answer to this dilemma could be that the tinker is a romanticised figure of the individual who refuses to conform to accepted norms, and therefore a deliberately magnified picture of eccentricity and otherness.

'Miscellaneous Poems' is a well chosen name for a section which includes diverse poems such as 'Died on the Street' and 'Man and the Engine'. 'Died on the Street' may very well be considered an early example of the kind of poetry nowadays called 'instamatic'. In this poem, Geddes records the drama of a woman dying in the street, but the register and style are not coldly factual and journalistic as in most instamatic poems. Rather, this is perhaps one of the most emotionally stirring and expressive pieces Geddes ever wrote. The central theme is his heartfelt belief in human sympathy, in particular towards the social derelicts here represented by the dead woman. The immediate underlying implication is that the woman is neglected by most of the passers-by because they do not know who she is and what she did, and the only exception is '[...] a curious crowd,/ Talking or whispering loud'.⁵⁶ In short there is a hint of the class discrimination and hypocrisy of the time: the woman was a working-class person, which offers the poet the opportunity to address the classes speaking 'from pedestals' in a quite mordant tone (p. 57), and try to kindle in the reader a wider human sympathy. Echoes of Leopardi and Thomson hang over the poem, in particular in the lines where Geddes appeals to God in sceptical terms, because his religious faith is profoundly shaken by people's lack of love and care towards the wretched woman. A particular connection with Thomson's masterpiece

⁵⁵ 'The Tinker', in *The Spectre Alyth and Other Selections*, pp.45-50 (p. 50).

⁵⁶ 'Dead on the Street', in *The Spectre Alyth and Other Selections*, pp. 54-57 (p. 54).

occurs when Geddes makes use of the metaphorical phrase 'life's labyrinth'. He refers to his own tribute to the dead woman in the following lines:

Lost from life's labyrinth,
 Though not of amaranth,
 This my poor tribute take,
 Sister of mine. (p. 55)

His questions to God bear a striking resemblance to some of Leopardi's deliberations on the link between human unhappiness and reason. In words echoing Leopardi in his 'Song of the Night', Geddes wonders:

Why make us reason *why*
 When nought can satisfy?
 Happy the birds in bower,
 Knowing not reason's power,
 To whom the present *is* -
 Future -- but nothingness. (p. 54)

Like Pascal, Geddes points out here that rationality is the source of human unhappiness, since it gives men the consciousness of his suffering, and makes them brood about the meaning of life beyond the present. Nevertheless, there is no evidence that Geddes read Leopardi, whereas we know that he profoundly admired Burns, and indeed the above quoted lines recall the last stanza of 'To a Mouse':

Still thou art blest, compar'd wi' me!
 The present only toucheth thee:
 But, Och! I backward cast my e'e,
 On prospects drear!
 An' forward, tho' I canna see,

I guess an' fear!⁵⁷

In 'A Man and the Engine' Geddes strikes a totally different chord. The 'I' speaking in the poem is a mechanic, who, at the beginning, denies being 'a maker of rhymes', a professional poet, and yet, he admits:

[...] at sundry times,
When I am idle or work is scarce,
Thoughts do move within my head -
Thoughts which seem to rhyme allied,
Thoughts in music garmented.⁵⁸

In other words, Geddes, like Smith before him, suggests that poetic inspiration can stem from unusual, traditionally unconventional sources, and that poetry is at times present in places where nobody would have ever hoped to find it. The city, for example, is one of them. He identifies himself with the mechanic when, elaborating on the previous idea, he writes:

Little I know of the glint and gleam
Of the sun as it falls on wood and stream,
Little I know of beast or bird,
And thought is a thing I can scarce afford;
Yet even within this dingy sphere
I think I could find a poem here,
Were I only blessed with a little wit,
And my engine should be the theme of it. (p. 58)

⁵⁷ Robert Burns, 'To a Mouse', in *Poetical Works of Robert Burns*, ed. by William Wallace (Edinburgh: Chambers, 1990), pp. 71-73 (p. 73).

⁵⁸ 'The Man and the Engine', in *The Spectre Alyth and Other Selections*, pp. 58-64 (p. 58).

Thus the subject of the poem is introduced: through the *persona* of the mechanic Geddes tackles the relationship between man and the industrial environment; in this respect, he can be credited with a pioneering role in the elaboration of this specific theme in nineteenth-century poetry. 'Man and the Engine' is among the first notable nineteenth-century poems dealing directly with the problems and dilemmas caused by industrialisation. Geddes will write other poems bearing the same stamp, and subsequent writers will develop the theme. The mechanic is the poetic *persona* of a poet who chooses to talk about the city and not the countryside, and who can derive inspiration from the 'clank of the chain' (p. 58) and the industrial landscape. As in 'The New Inferno', there seems to be a suggestion that the industrial din has beauties of its own. However, one should be careful about jumping to such conclusions in 'The Man and the Engine', since it is a more complex work than the previous poem. There are irony and ambiguity in the handling of the urban theme. The novelty of the poem consists especially in its psychoanalytic component, which involves the complicated, unremitting relationship between the mechanic and the engine he uses at work every day. Furthermore, it is the first poem in which the Whitmanesque quality of Geddes's style is particularly noticeable. Even if Geddes never indulges in vernacular idiom, the language he adopts here mirrors the inflection and structure of everyday colloquial speech.

A very effective device is the use of the first-person narration and a direct second-person addressee: the reader is involved in the mechanic's account of his everyday repetitive existence, and attracted by his inquisitive attitude and discursive style. He begins his tirade by describing the effects that the engine produces on him. He says that, even after work, he continues to see 'The ponderous beam and its ponderous arms' and to hear its throbbing, which is like a 'wearisome refrain/ [...] welded or woven in/ with the texture' of his brain (p. 59). He wishes he could get rid of that ubiquitous tormenting presence, but he cannot; the engine has become part of his physical and spiritual life, and its influence is so overwhelming that he is convinced that 'The thing has sense, the thing has a soul' (p. 60). Another interesting and effective device is the succession of epithets used to refer to the industrial machine. The protagonist makes use of various shifting terms, which range

from nouns such as 'engine' and 'thing' to the personal pronoun 'he'. Behind the motley and rambling choice of neutral and masculine pronouns there is, in fact, a complex logic which reflects the ever-changing relationship between the man and the engine. The alternate use of 'it' and 'he' testifies to the speaker's psychological instability and insecurity in relation to the machine.

At first, he presents himself as the victim of the haunting 'thing', but after a couple of stanzas the relationship undergoes a total reversal: the thing turns into an animate being, and it is referred to as a 'he' victimised by the worker. In other words, the engine becomes the personification of an individual whose freedom is curbed by another man, and, particularly, of the working class exploited by the capitalist. What the man previously described as a torturing throbbing machinery becomes now the 'throes of a spirit in pain' (p. 60). Despite the apparent self-assertiveness expressed by means of a strong and repetitive use of the first-person pronoun, the mechanic's schizophrenic attitude towards the engine is evident in the dynamic symbolism which involves the machine itself -- standing sometimes for the victim of industrialisation, and other times for the source of the evil and horror of the modern industrial world. Hence the man's changing views of the engine: from victim and slave it becomes 'a monster', 'a gnome' (p. 61) hidden under its exterior structure. He establishes a love-hate relationship with the machine, which, like a snake, has the power 'to draw and fascinate' (p. 61); some mysterious force attracts the mechanic to it, and yet he simultaneously feels hatred and almost disgust for that pseudo-human thing which seems to look at him from behind its framework 'with vindictive eyes,/ Heaving his breast in passion sighs,/ Gnashing his teeth in his impotence' (p. 61).

The mysterious attraction that the man feels towards the mechanical monster finds explanation in a stanza which stands out in the poem as one of its most appalling passages. The form -- or the personality -- which he perceives behind the mechanical structure of the engine simultaneously fascinates and repels him because it is another image of himself, as well as of the mass of individuals victimised by the industrial system:

O God, how I shudder then, and see
 In vision a mass of humanity,
 Huddled, crushed out of symmetry;
 [...]

O God, how I shudder then, for I know
 That form -- that form which lies below;
 That mass of mangled humanity
 Is all that remains of his ancient foe --
 'Tis I, 'tis I. (p. 61)

In other words, the form lying behind the lifeless matter of the engine metamorphoses into the soul of the working class to which the protagonist belongs. The horror of that form is the horror of an individual subjected to the strains and routine stress of maddening toil.⁵⁹ But the most interesting consequence of the confusion of the mechanic's identity with the engine's latent spirit emerges particularly in the final section of the poem, where the engine becomes animate and begins to talk to the man, although the speaking voice might well be that of the worker, or of his subliminal self.

The machine is now a 'he' who first accuses the man of smothering his spiritual life and manacling his freedom, and then addresses him a more biting and aggressive long speech about the affinity between their lots and destinies. A series of parallel situations are conjured up in front of the reader: the man may well be a God-

⁵⁹ Two literary associations are immediately recalled by Geddes's line "'Tis I, 'tis I", whereby the man recognises the form lying below the engine as an image of himself. Kurtz's cry 'The horror! The horror!' in *Heart of Darkness* is very alike to the mechanic's epiphanic perception of the monstrous form as a projection of his own heart of darkness. Yet, even more stunningly, this Kafkaesque image looks forward to the section of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* which Kenneth Buthlay called 'The Octopus' (I refer in particular to lines 353-368). See *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, ed. by Kenneth Buthlay (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1987), pp. 30-33. Here MacDiarmid transports into Scots a poem by the Russian writer Sinaida Hippus originally entitled 'Ona', which in Russian means 'She'. The title refers to the poet's psyche or soul, which is represented by the phantasmagorical metaphor of a polyp ('poulp'). At the end of the poem the narrator says: 'And this dead thing, this loathsome black impurity,/ This horror that I shrink from -- is my soul'. The octopus, the serpent and the dragon are recurrent images in MacDiarmid's modern epic, and apparently he did not realise that a similar symbolism was used many years before by the Dundee poet.

like figure manipulating the machine, but, he also acts according to a scheme plotted by some superior power; the engine is an automaton manoeuvred by the worker, but the worker is a similar slave or puppet, 'only clothed upon/ With bone and sinew, body, brain' (p. 63); moreover, they are interdependent, bound to each other, otherwise they would not be what they are. The superior power governing the man's actions is named in different ways by the engine: 'superior Fate', 'He', 'Being', which indicate both a secular and a religious paramount authority -- the unrelenting factory system and the Calvinist God who predestined man to face that fate: 'Your constitution, temperament,/ Were formed for you in ages past:/ These are the circles round you cast', says the engine to the worker (p. 63). Geddes succeeds in jumbling the identity of the two protagonists also by means of linguistic devices. For example, at some point the engine makes use of the same words uttered previously by the worker in addressing his readers. 'You may laugh, you may scoff' (p. 63), says the engine to the man, whereas a few stanzas before the man turned to his audience, and said: 'You may laugh if you choose, you may scoff' (p. 60).

The stylistic and rhetorical components are essential to the understanding of the poem. Most of the poem is written in couplets. They impart a regular rhythm, which is also the underlying rhythm of industrial toil; the terms used to describe the throbbing machinery in function are powerful and onomatopoeic, as, for example, in these lines:

Turn the crank and put it off,
 Turn the crank and put it on,
 Then you would know as well as I,
 Then you would see, and could not deny. (p. 59)

There are many other similar instances in the poem. In addition, the numerous repetitions, the assonances and alliterations, and the overall use of the short line are effective devices which the poet can handle with dexterity. The choice of the couplet may have been also dictated by the underlying social satire of the poem; the mutual dependence between the man and the engine is the vehicle for the author's censure of

human alienation and exploitation in the industrial age. In addition to this satirical vein, the poem is informed by irony and paradox, which derive not only from the reciprocal slavery of the protagonists but also from their quasi-symbiotic relationship. The acme of this ironic bent is reached in the finale of the poem.

Here the man enacts a double role: on the one hand, he is the destroyer of the engine, a Luddite rebelling against the economic system; on the other, he is the executor of an act of liberation which the engine itself almost instigates by saying '[...] I know you do/ Long to escape from your bondage too' (p. 64). The poet refers to the mechanic's violent urge to put an end to the machine's taunting by allusive means, rather than by direct statements. By destroying the engine, the man also sets himself free from the mutual bondage between them. Hence the general grotesque effect of the episode; the demolition act is simultaneously a cause of death and freedom. However, this *dénouement* presents another level of semantic complexity. The man has already admitted that the form behind the automaton's bones is a projection of himself and of individuals like himself. Accordingly, is the destruction of the engine a metaphor for his own self-destruction?

There is no doubt that the ambiguity and complexity of the poem's symbolism allow such an interpretation. Nonetheless, a counter-argument undermines this pessimistic and gloomy conclusion: Geddes's attitude was overall sanguine, even as regards the drawbacks and flaws of technological progress, as he repeatedly showed in public as well as in his works. After writing in 'The New Inferno' that there is a peculiar beauty in the urban world, it would be contradictory to conclude a poem with a picture of suicide as a liberating act. As I have previously pointed out, owing to his generally positive and active response to the problems of his age, Geddes succeeded in avoiding the spiritual conflicts and angst which eventually destroyed Thomson and Davidson. Yet the finale of 'The Man and the Engine' remains ambivalent, and it certainly raises questions about the poet's divided reaction to contemporary changes in society and morality.

'The Man and the Engine' is not an isolated and unique example of poetry tackling contemporary issues. There are other late nineteenth-century Scottish poems which focus on similar themes, although one may have some reservations

about their achievement on the stylistic and expressive level. One of these poems is Alexander Anderson's 'The Engine', published for the first time in the 1879 volume *Ballads and Sonnets*. Thus, it appeared seven years before Geddes's poem, and it is a plausible hypothesis that the Dundee poet was familiar with it. Alexander Anderson was commonly known as 'Surfaceman', a pseudonym he derived from his profession as railway navvy. He is another example of an autodidact writer, although he received formal education when he was a child at Grocketford in Galloway. He is mostly remembered for his lullabies for children and for his poems extolling the railways. 'The Engine' belongs to the latter category. The protagonist is the locomotive, which the poet glorifies and almost mythologises it as the wonder of the day and a praiseworthy achievement of progress. There are many affinities with Geddes's poem. Anderson's engine too is subject to a form of animism or personification whereby it becomes endowed with a spiritual life -- 'With a heart of fire, and a soul of steel'.⁶⁰ A curious detail is that both Geddes and Anderson make use of the same antonomasia to identify the power of the machine, and as illustrious personification of strength: Samson. The relationship between the man and the engine is similarly based on mutual subservience, even though Anderson adds a positive element to it by calling it reciprocal 'trust'. Accordingly, the epithet 'monster', which in Geddes is obviously derogatory, acquires a different significance in Anderson's poem. Through a simile, the engine is compared with Frankenstein's monster, therefore with a sophisticated work of science, described either as a 'Titan of toil' or as a mythological 'thunder-horse' ridden by Lilliputian man. In spite of its dwarfing effect, the machine is eventually presented as a proper subject-matter for poetry, just as the mechanic suggests at the beginning of Geddes's poem.

The two poems certainly strike a similar note, but their overall impact on the reader is different. Unless Anderson's poem is interpreted as a thoroughly ironical representation of the industrialised world, his ultimate message is in tune with the ideas of Vorticism and Futurism; in particular, the poem reflects Filippo Marinetti's

⁶⁰ All references to Anderson's poem are taken from the *English Poetry. Full-Text Database*, 5 discs (Cambridge and North America: Electronic Book Technologies and Chadwyck-Healey Ltd, 1995).

speed cult and admiration for the dynamism of the mechanical age, as well as the Italian's vociferous, slightly bombastic, style. On the other hand, 'The Man and the Engine' is permeated by a less histrionic tenor, and by an essentially tragic undercurrent. One might therefore conclude that, although Geddes did not withdraw from the contemporary scene to find consolation in a mythologised past, he still retained a sceptical attitude towards the transformation of society caused by the industrial phenomenon. In other words, in 'The Man and the Engine' he shows how the ordinary life of an ordinary worker can become a poetic subject but with the purpose of certifying and not extolling this transformation.

With the poem entitled 'In the Valley of the Shadow', Geddes strikes a more doleful note. What is the 'valley of the shadow', called also 'shadowland' in the concluding stanza? The all-embracing mystery, which involves both characterisation and setting, makes the question difficult to answer. Nevertheless, various elements seem to hint at a sort of purgatory state, so that the poem may be said to provide the intermediary zone between 'the New Jerusalem' and 'the New Inferno', even if it is written in a completely different style and tone. The Dantesque sentence 'Every mortal/ Wends at last unto this portal'⁶¹ suggests that every single human being must visit the shadow-land, no matter how good or bad their behaviour on earth has been. In the final verses, the gloomy valley is described as bordering on Heaven, where the meritorious will eventually be admitted. The protagonist of the poem is one of them, a Kilmeny-like figure whose stainless soul contrasts with the open confession of sin by the speaking 'we', whose identity can be only conjectured.

The angelic woman of the poem is called sister, which in itself is not a particularly enlightening detail, since Geddes makes use of the same affectionate term in other poems, such as, for example, 'Dead on the Street'. Yet, bearing in mind his biography, both the image of death and the epithet 'sister' can be more directly related to his individual experience. Geddes lost two sisters; the poem reflects both

disc 4, pp. 115-137 [on CD-ROM], which reproduced the poem from *Ballads and Sonnets* (London: Macmillan, 1879), pp. 115-120.

⁶¹'In the Valley of the Shadow', in *The Spectre Alyth and Other Selections*, pp. 64-67 (p. 66).

his grief for that tragic loss and his hope that the 'Divine Almighty Brother' (p. 66) -- another name for Christ -- will guide them along the dim path of the shadowy valley until they reach a more gleaming abode. Hence the poem is also the author's prayer to God; yet the individuality of the speaker is hidden behind the use of the plural form 'we', which can mislead the reader into thinking that it designates other unidentified characters inhabiting the valley of the shadow. By avoiding a strictly personal style, Geddes succeeds in conveying the universal significance of the experience described in the poem, while still retaining an unaffected compassion for individuals like the 'gentle sister'.

The same melancholy tone characterises two other poems of the collection. They are both written in a form of diluted Scots, and provide two significant examples contradicting Muir's theory that from Burns onwards Scots as a literary language occurred only in comic verse. 'Back at the Wa'' is apparently about a capital punishment which constantly recalls another execution, especially in the penultimate stanza, where the speaking voice addresses God in these terms:

Be near him, God, for His dear sake,
 Wha in Gethsemane
 Tae Thee His piteous cry did make
 Oot o' His agony.
 If He cried oot in His despair,
 Forsaken, left by a',
 What can His weaker brither bear
 Whase back is at the wa'.⁶²

The poet especially underlines the victim's solitude and lack of human sympathy around him, which leads him to lose what he defines as 'living faith', or 'the faith in neebor man' (p. 69). He is one of Geddes's alienated figures, a brother of the female protagonist of 'Dead on the Street', but, at the same time, he is also the poet's alter-

⁶²'Back at the Wa'', in *The Spectre Alyth and Other Selections*, pp. 67-70 (p. 70).

ego, so that the author's conclusive plea for a sympathetic smile, 'Tae cheer the heart and save the faith/ O' him that's at the wa'' (p. 70), is also a way of conveying his belief in the universal need of human empathy. Hence the image of the man whose back is at the wall shades off into a metaphorical representation of an individual who, because of his rebelliousness, and supposedly his unorthodoxy, stands aloof from society -- 'pairted frae the rest' (p. 67). Thus he personifies stoic eccentricity, enduring till the moment of death.

The other poem in Scots is called 'The Hieland Hame' -- a title with Kailyard echoes. Although the images and characters of the poem are hackneyed, thus unusual in Geddes's work, it still deserves attention, because it is so strikingly different from his best achievements. The speaking voice is that of a Highland woman, who personifies the nostalgic longing for the past by singing her maudlin 'Auld Lang Syne' about the poor but happy life she used to live in her 'hieland hame'. She compares her present situation with that of a bird inside a gilded cage, thus emphasising the sense of confinement and restriction she feels despite the material improvement brought about by the new life. The land of exile is not specified but defined by the description of its industrialised agricultural methods, which contrast with the wilderness and 'dour'⁶³ ground of the Highlands. The series of contrasting pairs between past and present, natural land and artificial fields is perhaps trite, but the woman's open protest against the rural gentry's exploitation of nature and people strikes a more poignant and impressive note. Her anger against the law is manifest when she mentions the death of her parents following the clearance from their native land. Hence her words and tone acquire a radical flavour, and her lament for the old good times turns into a contemporary outcry against social injustice. The following is a significant example of her complaint:

It made it nae better tae bear --
Tae ken, whan they turned us oot,
That the laird -- a deil-ma-care --

⁶³'The Hieland Hame', in *The Spectre Alyth and Other Selections*, pp. 70-74 (p. 71).

Was leadin' the life o' a brute.
 The siller we toiled for -- the rent --
 He spent on riot an' sin;
 Like anither ane, weel kent,
 Wha fell to feedin' wi' swine.

There was nane that could relieve's,
 It was strictly dune by the law;
 But the law that's made for thieves
 Is the greatest thief o' a'.
 O wad the gentry think less
 Hoo their idle time tae spenn',
 An' think mair o' the distress
 O' ootcast women an' men. (p. 73)

Commonplace images also recur in the poem with the title 'The Oldest Inhabitant', a cross-reference to the 'old inhabitant' in 'The Glenisla Gathering'. The central theme of the poem is very up-to-date: the incorporation of small towns and old villages into the big cities, leading to the creation of an agglomerated urban area and the consequent loss of community values and customs. On the other hand, the narrator -- the old inhabitant -- evinces a sceptical attitude towards human judgement and knowledge at large, and questions the absolute opposition between past and present, old communal joy and current individual unhappiness. In a sort of verse preface to the poem, he says:

Has the world lost its gladness? -- do the ages grow in doubt?
 Or are each and all delusions, age and sadness, youth and mirth?
 Truly we know nothing rightly, things seem ever in haze,
 Never seen in true proportion through our dim imperfect gaze.⁶⁴

⁶⁴'The Old Inhabitant', in *The Spectre Alyth and Other Selections*, pp. 80-86 (p. 80).

There are several echoes of 'The Man and the Engine', and of Anderson's 'The Engine', such as the metaphorical identification of the industrial machine -- specifically the train -- with an animate being (in this case a half-mythological 'iron horse'), and the use of onomatopoeic language to convey the neurotic speed of mechanical paraphernalia. The dominant tone is quasi-apocalyptic. The old inhabitant is the spokesman for an anti-utilitarian view of society; he sees man's technological achievements as the source of forthcoming self-destruction and social ruin. In addition to this moralistic reprobation of materialistic progress, the poem is permeated by a mythical halo, which does not clash with its realistic themes. The following verses are an example of this antisyzygy:

O man, your steps retrace,
 Give back the things you have won,
 Undo the deeds you have done;
 You would not keep your place,
 Still you would peer and pry
 Where you thought the fates forbade -
 You have robbed the earth and sky
 Of the secrets which they had,
 But the fates looked on and smiled,
 And the laughter-loving gods,
 While you filched their treasure loads,
 For they know that you only piled
 More burdens on your back,
 Did you their drudging hack. (p. 81)

Man is described as the victim of the torrential stream of modern life, drowning in the whirlpool of progress and unable to set himself free from the enslaving demands and restless rhythm of industrial toil. This is effectively conveyed in the following lines by means of a galloping rhythm:

He is the driven,
 He is the dragged,
 As with iron band!
 What if he lingered?
 What if he lagged?
 What if he fingered
 With careless hand,
 To ease the veins,
 Which with straining bleed,
 The tightened reins
 Of the maddened steed? (p. 82)

The mad horse has become a metaphor of modern life -- 'a race/ Where nothing stable appears', or 'a torrent' in which man is lost (p. 83) -- which victimises human beings, so that what is left to them is simply 'to pant on and endure' (p. 83), but simultaneously and relentlessly trying to defeat all competitors in the 'race'. The Schopenhauerian notion of man as struggler is here evoked in opposition to the symbolic image of the 'quiet pool' (p. 83) of a country setting. Together with 'unrest', modern life brings about 'doubt', 'distrust' and 'despair' (p. 84), which the old inhabitant nostalgically sets in contrast with the bygone peaceful life -- 'truthful, calm, serene' (p. 83) -- of the rural community.

The old inhabitant's vision of the old village -- separated from 'the world which lay outside' and opposed to 'the cities of men' (p. 84) -- is too nostalgic and sentimentalised to be shared by the poet; Geddes distances himself from this character, not by direct disagreement, but by having him employ an over-romanticised language to describe the lost community which cannot possibly belong to the author. Thus the speaking 'I' is never identified with Geddes. Moreover, the pastoral representation encapsulates an implicit anti-pastoral aspect, and a subtle criticism of man's sentimentalising attitude towards the past and old social structures.

On the other hand, Geddes did not deny the importance of certain values which modern society seemed to neglect to favour the development of new moral ideas and cultural phenomena. In the poem entitled 'Burns', the illustrious bard stands for a set of values which contemporary man no longer seems to acknowledge, such as 'truth, lowliness, and love', now replaced by 'falsity and ease'.⁶⁵ The poet's most heartfelt protest is that man seems to have lost the ability to appreciate the 'poor and small' things of the earth, to recognise the divine in the human, and the fact that 'heaven is one with earth' (p. 89), and 'the gods [...] dwell with us/ And share the common lot' (p. 90). By this statement Geddes echoes the Carlylean image of the poet as seer and prophet, but also anticipates MacDiarmid's belief that the body and the spirit are entwined in a mysterious way. Burns is described as such a poet hero and poet prophet.

It is ironic that this poem was recited at the Burns Club statue inauguration ceremony, and that Geddes, usually very critical of the false popularisation of the national bard,⁶⁶ agreed to write a poem for that occasion. It may be that he was trying to convey an image of Burns totally conflicting with the clichéd representations of the poet, but since his intention is not clearly defined in the poem, the audience probably misunderstood his point completely.

Like the previous volumes, Geddes's third collection of poems, *In the Valhalla and Other Poems* (1891), includes a heterogeneous range of poetic forms and styles. Again the author speaks through the voice of different poetic *personae*, and plays various poetic roles, ranging from the humanitarian, radical thinker of poems such as 'In the Valhalla', 'The Glory Has Departed', and 'Glendale & Co.', through the realist poet of 'The Farm', to the sentimental speaker in 'In the Heart of the Valley' and other elegies.

In 'In the Valhalla', as well as in 'Thrift, Thrift, Thrift' and 'Heroes', Geddes takes sides with the working-class against industrial and capitalist exploitation, and,

⁶⁵ 'Burns', in *The Spectre Alyth and Other Selections*, pp. 87-92 (p. 89).

⁶⁶ A humorous version of Geddes's criticism of the Burns cult is the poem 'The Deil and the Scotchman', included in *In the Valhalla and Other Poems* (Dundee: John Leng, 1891), pp. 56-60.

particularly in the first of these poems, he ridicules the 'vain idolatry'⁶⁷ and grand commemoration of important individuals, while at the same time he supports the heroism of 'the lowly and the meek' (p. 11). This Manzoni-like plea for the poor and the worker is repeated in a more sentimentalised manner in other poems of the collection; for example, in 'Thou Knowest' the poet partly identifies with the protagonist -- a woman poet who died from consumption -- because she is 'a child of strife',⁶⁸ a kind of pariah of her race, and an outcast from her place, as the poet was ex-centric both within the community of Alyth and in Dundee.

Geddes points out his otherness from the citizens of Dundee in the prosaic poem 'The Glory has Departed' -- a title which translates the Hebrew word 'Ichabod', which is actually used at the end of the poem to signify the absence of true heroism and glorifying values in contemporary society. Geddes attacks the authorities of Dundee because of their manoeuvres to turn the 'town' into a 'city' in step with modern urban and technological development. He does not object to economic and social progress itself but to the hubris of the Provost and his colleagues, who have the unrealistic ambition to transform the appearance and lifestyle of the town, without considering the fact that these artificial changes only lead Dundee to lose gradually its own identity of a small, yet self-sufficient, town. The following lines may appear sentimental:

The good old town is gone, irrevocably gone, dead, vanished!
 We will weep for the brave old town,
 For the brave old town that emerged buoyantly again and again through
 wars, famine, pestilence, fires, and sacking --
 [...]
 You can remain if you choose, you that have destroyed and despatched
 her;
 You can welcome in with plaudits and singing her usurper, the new City;

⁶⁷ 'In the Valhalla', in *In the Valhalla and Other Poems*, pp. 9-13 (p. 12).

⁶⁸ 'Thou Knowest', in *In the Valhalla and Other Poems*, pp. 90-93 (p. 92).

The new city of emptiness, frivolity, humbug, pretension, fussy
importance;

The new city of shoddy and jute, tallying the mind of its rulers.⁶⁹

In fact, there is only a superficial nostalgic feeling in these verses. The most striking aspect of the poem is its Whitmanesque conversational style. It is an example of Geddes's poetry of facts, which essentially aims to denounce what, to his mind, are the wrong policies of the Dundee administrators, and to propose alternative schemes, more democratic and apt to deal with the real social and economic problems of the town. Geddes was a political and social activist; therefore, he never indulged in the nostalgic evocation of past glories, but pointed out the qualities of old systems of society only to show the risks of uncontrolled industrial progress and complicity with Mammon.

Geddes's intentions clearly surface in the poem entitled 'The Farm' -- another poem after the manner of Whitman. It describes the entrepreneurial initiative of a country couple who long for a farm of their own, and, in order to raise the necessary funds, enter the public-house business. Unfortunately, something goes wrong and they end up losing all their savings, and, consequently, the would-be farmer yields to fatal dipsomania. Geddes's anti-bourgeois mentality, and his personal struggle against the overwhelming and destructive effects of financial gain, emerge in the concluding, anti-Mammon verse of the poem: 'Ah, how the gold, the devil purchases our souls with, turns into leaves, withered, dry, and seared!'.⁷⁰ Apart from encompassing a critique of urban exploitation and spiritual aridity symbolised by the image of the inn, the poem also presents an anti-romantic vision of rurality by gradually turning the farm from a dream-like perspective into a real source of self-destruction and death. Thus Geddes does not stigmatise the city's corruption solely but man's manic chase after economic wealth and social success.

'Glendale & Co.' is the most representative piece of the collection. It focuses on similar issues, but from a more universal perspective, whereby the factory

⁶⁹ 'The Glory has Departed', in *In the Valhalla and Other Poems*, pp. 97-105 (p. 100).

⁷⁰ 'The Farm', in *In the Valhalla and Other Poems*, pp. 34-44 (p. 44).

becomes the microcosmic picture of the modern urban world. Geddes proves to be here 'son of the city',⁷¹ in the sense that he reveals a profound understanding of the reality of urbanisation, and the poem thus becomes one of the most significant Victorian depictions of the industrial world, with its repulsive but also attractive aspects. Because of its anti-Kailyard style and subject-matter, 'Glendale & Co.' can be seen as the poetic counterpart of Brown's *The House with the Green Shutters*. Its Whitmanesque metre and prosaic modulation are striking aspects from the very beginning, where the Firm is introduced in terms which are simultaneously realistic and mythical:

Once on a time the Firm small and unimportant,
It has grown great from small beginnings;
Now its factories cover acres of ground,
They have streets running through them;
They are a city in themselves.⁷²

The Firm is referred to by means of different metaphors, such as the navy (p. 123), the pre-MacDiarmidian image of the sea monster Leviathan (p. 124), and of a Kafkaesque military bureaucracy headed by Glendale himself. The portrait of this robot-like capitalist is ironical:

Glendale, of Glendale & Co., is a methodical man,
A man of undoubted honesty, of unquestionable morality.

[...]

He prides himself on being practical, on not being a dreamer, a
sentimentalist.(p. 125)

In fact, his morality only consists in guaranteeing the pacific coexistence and co-operation of the workers by prohibiting 'unchastity', 'debt' and 'the establishment of

⁷¹ Dryerre, p. 343.

⁷² 'Glendale & Co.', in *In the Valhalla and Other Poems*, pp. 122-135 (p. 122).

public-houses in the neighbourhood' (p. 127). In this way he defends his own rather than the workers' interests.

Glendale's total disinterest in the cause of the working-class is emphasised in the description of his isolated dwelling -- 'apart from the town, standing secure from observation, in the quiet of the suburbs' (p. 127) -- also depicted as a 'venerable castle, keeping up brave show of strength and defiance' (p. 128). His abode resembles the New Jerusalem, because it is removed from the 'din of the town', the 'dingy alleys' and 'filthy closes' (p. 127), as the New Jerusalem is isolated from the clamour and toilsome life of the New Inferno.

From his villa Glendale can only perceive the beautiful aspects of the town, and, as if subject to a form of pathetic fallacy, he sees the town from a distance as an 'extensive landscape, sea-scape: --/ A serenity as of Heaven' (p. 127). The poet makes clear that it is a fallacy, that the beauty he perceives is false because he fails to recognise the presence of its opposite -- the 'dingy alleys, the filthy closes'. The image of the firm's 'foundry blasts reflected on the heavens, casting a ruddy radiance as far as the confusion of stars in the Milky Way' (p. 123) is genuinely beautiful, because it is real and implies an awareness of the horrifying sublimity of some aspects of urban scenery.

Geddes's description becomes Dickensian in the picture of Glendale's servants, who live in a 'Babel Tower, with its ten flats divided into single rooms', and are 'low-browed, ugly, forbidding,/ Grown-up gutter children -- producers themselves of gutter children,/ Rum drinkers, fiery, quarrelsome' (p. 129). Nevertheless, some form of human sympathy seems to inhabit the place, whereas in the firm the workers are 'part and parcel a product of Glendale & Co.' (p. 123), and there is no space for human fallibility nor for human individuality, which must be 'swallowed up in the Firm' (p. 125).

Geddes's invective against the capitalist and the system he represents becomes more direct and explosive in the last sections of the poem as in this sarcastic appeal to Glendale:

Yet listen a moment, Glendale, of Glendale & Co.

I have been brooding over these things,

I have been thinking over your perfect automatical penny-in-the-slot
system; over your home in the suburbs; over these dens in the
slums --

The conclusion? That you are not such a practical man as you deem
yourself to be, or as others deem you to be;

That in spite of the Scriptures we can only think of you as *raca* [*sic*] -- a
fool. (p. 130)

Essentially Geddes's final attack is against social discrimination, rank and class distinctions, labour exploitation, and imperialism, which culminates in the image of the 'Intrepid Traveller' -- the imperialist version of Glendale -- both victimiser and violator of human rights. Ultimately, it is a whole society of psychological and moral abusers that the poet vilifies, a class of individuals who deem possession more important than individual identity, what man has taking precedence over what man is.

The importance of Geddes's role in the development of Scottish poetry towards a modernist, anti-parochial expression continues to be underestimated. Whereas Thomson and Davidson were unable to embrace Keats's principle of 'negative capability', and go on living in a situation of existential and cultural doubt, Geddes, like his contemporary Clough, showed that it is possible to live in uncertainties, as long as they are constantly challenged by individual activism and self-trust. Although some of his poems may appear gloomy and pessimistic, they generally conceal a positive message; Geddes suggests humanitarian action rather than solipsistic meditation as a means of facing the problems of modern society. In this and other respects, Geddes's work and thought look forward to MacDiarmid's; in particular, the way in which the Dundee poet can extrapolate universal meanings from local phenomena is certainly one of the most relevant affinities between the two poets, endowing even their most Scottish works with a significance which goes beyond Scottishness.

CONCLUSION

i. Hugh MacDiarmid and the legacy of eccentricity

If one accepts Gregory Smith's identification of the essential hallmark of the Scot as a yoking together of opposite traits, MacDiarmid must be seen as the *par excellence* expression and personification of this antisyzygy. Norman MacCaig pointed that out clearly. After admitting that the Scots present such a characteristic, he wrote that 'the most wildly, spectacularly flourishing example of it is, surely, that fiery particle, the author of this book'.¹

'This book' is *Scottish Eccentrics*, and MacDiarmid could certainly be one of his 'strange procession' of remarkable individuals, and undoubtedly he lurks behind every single page of the book, as he does in his 'monstrous'² autobiography *Lucky Poet*, and in his numerous collections of essays. His eccentric Nietzschean egocentricity and egotism -- very much in line with Davidson's notion of man as the consciousness of the universe -- are always a strong and haunting presence in his writing, both when he writes under his own name or most renowned pen-name, or when he adopts the most extravagant pseudonyms. 'The Uncanny Scot', one of MacDiarmid's favourite phrases, which gives the title to Buthlay's selection of his prose, is clearly a self-referential epithet. Incidentally, Buthlay's volume includes the already quoted essay 'MacDiarmid on MacDiarmid', which could almost be seen as MacDiarmid's eccentric self-portrait removed from the *Scottish Eccentrics*.³

In his introductory essay on the Scottish Renaissance, which appeared in the *Scottish Educational Journal* of 16 January 1925, Alexander McGill lists some of the exponents of the movement:

¹ Norman MacCaig, 'A Note on the Author', in *Scottish Eccentrics*, pp. vii-xii (p. vii).

² *Ibid.*, p. viii.

³ See Chapter 1 footnote 10.

The most revolutionary member of the group [...] is C.M. Grieve, and the most moderate [...] is George Insh [...] The other members of the group are Edwin Muir, George Reston Malloch, and Hugh M'Diarmid.⁴

What Gill is clearly pointing out here is the peculiar form of antisyzygy and eccentricity which affected MacDiarmid's individual identity. In the case of MacDiarmid, the adoption of a pen-name does not merely indicate a division between a private and a public sphere, or the dualism of rural and urban experience which is one of the essential hallmarks of his personal and poetic development -- his Border origins on the one hand, and his move to Glasgow and London on the other. 'The Ettrick Shepherd' was John Wilson's forgery, or at least a hyperbolic caricature of the real shepherd. On the other hand, MacDiarmid is as real and authentic as Grieve; the pen-name was actually much more than a literary device to escape public censorship, because Grieve totally identified with his *alter-ego*; he internalised him, thus perpetuating a form of psychological doubleness.

The Gaelic-English poet Iain Crichton Smith once observed that

in Scottish literature there are many double men, including Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde; these however are ethical double men. 'I am a linguistic double man'.⁵

Perhaps this sounds an all too familiar comment, and yet it could still be applied to MacDiarmid except that in his case the attempt to pin down a single category of doubleness would be a lost battle from the start. MacDiarmid is not simply a 'double man' but an individual with a multi-faceted and prismatic personality, so much so that he could have undoubtedly been one of Pirandello's paradigmatic characters -- 'one,

⁴ Alexander McGill, 'Towards a Scottish Renaissance', in *Contemporary Scottish Studies*, ed. by Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet Press Ltd, 1995), pp. 1-5 (p. 2).

⁵ I. C. Smith, 'The Double Man', in *The Literature of Region and Nation*, ed. by R. P. Draper (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 137-146 (p. 137)

nobody, one hundred thousand' inner and outer selves. As Robert Crawford points out:

We might speak readily of MacDiarmid and his Maker, C. M. Grieve. But we would do better to speak of MacDiarmid and his many makers whose voices sound together, sometimes in harmony but more usually in a clashing but exciting near-Babel of tongues, a product not merely of any Caledonian Antisyzygy but of a fully heteroglossic imagination.⁶

With his perpetual shifting from one political and ideological position to the opposite, and his relentless oscillations between all kinds of extremes, he managed to confuse and shock his contemporaries, whose confused response is summed up in these lines by Hamish Henderson: 'Just what do you stand for, MacDiarmid? I'm still not certain./ I don' wanna step behin' dat tartan curtain ...'.⁷ Interestingly, a sort of Conrad-like horror seems to underlie this linguistically odd line, as if the author were foreseeing some nasty and disgusting 'thing' behind MacDiarmid's intentions, like the 'deid thing' envisaged by the Drunk Man which symbolises his own and the collective unconscious of the human race -- '*And this deid thing, whale-white obscenity,/ This horror that I writhe in -- is my soul!*'.⁸ Yet it is more likely that what Henderson meant was that MacDiarmid's position as regards the Scottish language and culture was marred by a confusion and inconsistency which disturbed him, and therefore needed to be clarified.

MacDiarmid's eccentric vision has been already and repetitively underlined by several critics, who named it in various and, in their turn, eccentric ways. For economy of space I will mention only a few examples. Catherine Kerrigan refers to MacDiarmid as 'the master of the internal debate', and although her comment

⁶ Robert Crawford, 'MacDiarmid and His Makers', in *Identifying Poets. Self and Territory in Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), pp. 42-63 (p. 63).

⁷ Hamish Henderson, 'To Hugh MacDiarmid (on reading *Lucky Poet*)', *Chapman*, 42 (1985), 35-36 (p. 36).

⁸ *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, p. 94.

specifically focuses on *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, what she says about MacDiarmid's method of portraying the Drunk Man's rapid fluctuation between extremes can be generally applied to his whole work. In his *opera omnia*, as well as in his life, MacDiarmid, like his Drunk Man, 'takes a position, rapidly pushes it to its limits, then turns it on its head to go on and explore the opposite argument';⁹ no behaviour is more eccentric than this, more recalcitrant towards any 'centre', or any accepted and once-and-for-all fixed ideas. Eccentricity and antiszygy -- devoid of its racist connotation, and merely taken in its meaning of 'opposites joked together' -- are concomitant components of MacDiarmid's personality and work. Ann Edwards Boutelle significantly links him with Blake, and defines his vision as 'double', and as 'the vision of paradox that unites contraries', and she further describes his dualistic mental outlook as a combination of the physical and the metaphysical, and his muse as characterised by 'both a divine halo and feet of clay'.¹⁰ Clearly we are reminded of Gregory Smith's symbolic image of the 'gargoyle's grinning at the elbow of a kneeling saint'¹¹ -- an iconographical representation of the notion of the Caledonian antiszygy which MacDiarmid appropriated and expounded in his writing.¹²

Kenneth White, certainly a Scottish ex-centric himself, has borrowed the classical and Coleridgean maxim of *coincidentia oppositorum* to express exactly the same idea: that MacDiarmid's poetry is the simultaneous expression of 'thought and experience', a dimension where rational thinking and the emotional or the purely physical reality converge¹³ -- in short, MacDiarmid's poetry proves that Edwin Muir's influential theory of the dissociation of sensibility in post-Union Scottish literature was an ideological fabrication of its time, now outdated and inappropriate. Finally, Alan Riach's comment on MacDiarmid's eclecticism and self-contradictoriness is worth mentioning because he defines, without specifically acknowledging it, the poet's

⁹ Catherine Kerrigan, 'MacDiarmid's Early Poetry', in *The History of Scottish Literature, IV: Twentieth Century*, ed. by Cairns Craig, pp. 75-85 (p. 81).

¹⁰ Ann Edwards Boutelle, *Thistle and Rose. A Study of Hugh MacDiarmid's Poetry* (Loanhead: Macdonald Publishers, 1980), pp. 11-12, 24.

¹¹ G. Gregory Smith, p. 35.

¹² In *A Drunk Man* this metaphor is one of the numerous intertexts. See p. 96: 'Grinnin' gargoyle by a saint/ Mephistopheles in Heaven,/ skeleton at a tea-meetin'/ Missin' link'.

¹³ See Kenneth White, 'Taking Off from Hugh MacDiarmid', *Scottish Literary Journal*, 17.1 (1990), 71-84.

Weltanschauung in terms which are very close to the Bakhtinian concept of dialogic imagination, and at the same time his words echo Kerrigan's idea of 'internal debate'. Riach underlines that MacDiarmid's 'imagination conducted a dialogue with itself, and he pursued its movements self-consciously, recognizing its multi-faceted nature as an active principle [...]'.¹⁴

The last statement is particularly important, because it indicates that the Whitmanesque tendency to embrace contradictory principles and move between antithetical positions can be a source of positive energy and, in MacCaig's words, a 'dynamic force'.¹⁵ In the essay on the Scottish Renaissance mentioned above, McGill also writes that 'M'Diarmid is the fanatic of the group, and it is around his work that the most contrary criticisms will be bandied'.¹⁶ The word 'fanaticism' appears contradictory, inappropriately contradictory in this case, in relation to someone who by all means and in the most extravagant ways repudiated literary and cultural canons, or who one day saw himself as a Nationalist and the next day as a Communist. But perhaps the word 'fanatic' is not a total misnomer, because when we look at MacDiarmid's pugnacious campaign for the revival of Scots in the 20s and early 30s, we cannot help perceiving an element of chauvinism which inevitably clashes with his subsequent all-embracing vision. In other words, his motto-like statement 'I'll always be whaur extremes meet' failed to apply to his attitude to the language to be used in literary works. His earlier intention 'to restore the Scots language to the full canon of expression available for all modern literary purposes'¹⁷ paradoxically implied that a unified language was necessary in order to re-establish and guarantee a national identity. So why did he in the 30s turn away from Scots to the English language, and why did he make use of innumerable intertextual and multilinguistic references? Was this another instance of his inherent penchant for contradiction?

MacDiarmid is the chief Scottish ex-centric, and his whole life and work are the enactment of a struggle against the prerogatives and assumptions of a presumed

¹⁴ 'Introduction' to *Hugh MacDiarmid. Selected Prose*, ed. by Alan Riach (Manchester: Crcanet Press Ltd, 1992), pp. ix-xxv (p. xvi).

¹⁵ Norman MacCaig, 'A Note on the Author', p. xi.

¹⁶ McGill, p. 3.

¹⁷ 'MacDiarmid on MacDiarmid', in *The Uncanny Scot*, p. 170.

centre, so why did he insist on Scotland having a new centre? Nowadays postcolonial theory offers us the tools to understand that very often first-rate literary products derive from a condition of cultural and ideological instability, and, more importantly, that to be out of the established centre and part of a heterogeneous cultural ambience is not, and is not to be seen as, a disadvantage. MacDiarmid himself understood this, otherwise he would not have written the *Scottish Eccentrics* in defence of eccentricity itself, or he would not have supported a minority language and culture such as Gaelic against the menace of extinction. That said, while the political cause of the Scots became urgent for him in the 1920s, in later years he turned to a different cause, which was to see Scotland in a cosmogonic perspective rather than as a national entity. In fact, this is already envisaged in some of the early lyrics, such as 'Ex-vermibus' and 'The Bonnie Broukit Bairn', but especially in *A Drunk Man*, where he writes:

He canna Scotland see wha yet
Canna see the Infinite
And Scotland in true scale to it. (p. 162)

or in the final section of this 'mixter-maxter gallimaufry'¹⁸ which ends up in a silence which speaks volumes -- 'O I ha'e Silence left/ -- "And weel ye nicht",/ Sae Jean'll say, "efter sic a nicht!"' (p. 167). It may be that he realised he had said enough about Scottish national identity, and that it was time to extend his concerns to a consideration of Scotland beyond nationality and nationalism. *A Drunk Man* was a springboard for his new enlarged vision, and the final silence is like a pause, a moment of reflection and introspection -- for both the author and the reader -- before confronting other, more complex issues.

On the general issue of Scottish national identity MacDiarmid's most significant contribution was not so much his questionable contention that national identity depends on the existence of a national language, as his having set out the parameters of the future debate. One of his best descriptions of Scotland is that which

identifies it with a 'diversity-in-unity',¹⁹ and one of his most revealing opinions about the Scots is that he conceived them as eccentric, and, to borrow Riach's terms, as 'wayward, outsiders, others, a breed of *isolatos*'.²⁰ In no way does this mean that their social and cultural status is debased but rather that they can enjoy the advantage of what Melville called 'ontological heroics',²¹ or a condition of remoteness which involves both gain and loss, victory and sacrifice.

Hence Kenneth White's enlightening statement that

a really creative mind works rather in a field (of tension, of contradiction) which is productive of ideas and hence provokes a perpetual renewal of identity, the whole process being vastly different from the orbiting around some hypothetical centre. (p. 75)

In this kind of field MacDiarmid produced his best works. A 'perpetual renewal of identity' affected him in both the private and public spheres, consisting in a constant approbation and subsequent rejection of various ideas, in exposing himself to all kinds of risks and excesses and plunging into the most diverse experiences. One may say that his identity was perpetually *in fieri*, a flexible mould which would never encompass a fixed and definite shape. Hence his habit of getting out of his 'self' and assuming different *personae*, and different poetic voices, which in some ways are also the multiple voices of his multi-faceted personality but essentially are a means of looking at things from outside, as if he were an exile writing about his own country.

MacDiarmid's eccentricity manifested itself in different fields of experience. He was a religious eccentric, because he rejected his father's Protestant orthodoxy, and embraced his own brand of religion, not bounded to a specific established creed, but syncretising personal metaphysical inquiries and a quasi-pagan conception of a Scottish mythological past. Like Gibbon and Muir, he appropriated some aspects of

¹⁸ MacCaig, p. xi.

¹⁹ 'Introducing "Hugh MacDiarmid"', in *Hugh MacDiarmid. Selected Prose*, pp. 9-12 (p. 10),

²⁰ Alan Riach, 'Demolition Man. An Introduction to *Contemporary Scottish Studies*', pp. vii-xxxi (p. xxvi).

²¹ Quoted by K. White, p. 77.

Celtic cults for his own mythopoeia, and associated them with Jungian philosophy. Yet, unlike his two contemporaries, MacDiarmid saw nostalgia as anathema, and rejected the notion of a lost and unrecoverable golden age of innocence. Despite his anti-Christian imagery and blasphemous metaphors, MacDiarmid is a religious poet, though in an unconventional way, who confronts himself and the reader with universal metaphysical preoccupations about the nature of humane experience.

I have already pointed out that MacDiarmid is a political and ideological eccentric, in that he continuously shifted positions, perpetually torn between an inherent sense of democracy and an egotistic ambition to stand out and differentiate himself from the mass. Indeed MacDiarmid increasingly reasserts the need of recreation of the nation and the self. In *Lucky Poet* he writes:

[...] what the Scottish people need above all to-day to realize is that [...] static adherence to any particular methodology marks the decline of civilization, for the temporal character of the universe decrees that the only alternative to advance is decay. [...] as Dr. Robert H. Thouless [...] says: 'We must be ready continually to revise our thought habits [...] It is only by increasing flexibility of mind that we can continue to adapt ourselves to our ever-changing environment. (pp. 154-155)

He condemned British Imperialism, yet he exalted Nietzsche, whose idea of the *Übermensch* is totally in line with imperialist thought and practice -- John Davidson's *Testament of an Empire Builder* is the paradigmatic literary expression of this juxtaposition of political and philosophical assumptions.

Finally, by propounding *Weltliteratur* like Joyce, Pound and Eliot, and dealing with a gallimaufry of styles, forms and themes, he was a literary eccentric: a post-Romantic, a modernist, and simultaneously the negation of both -- his colloquial language and sexual innuendoes are not in step with the Romantic sensibility, and, despite his genuine admiration of *The Waste Land*, Eliot's vision of 'ruins' and 'heap

of broken images'²² and modern desolation contrasts with MacDiarmid's more optimistic image of the stones as a receptacle of eternal knowledge and universal order which man still has the faculty to perceive and restore. Parallel to his interest in *Weltliteratur* is what MacDiarmid himself called an 'interpenetration of all languages' which corresponded to his aim to look for 'a diversity in unity, not for a unification of languages'.²³ Even his definition of Synthetic Scots reflects this international, multilinguistic perspective:

A Joycean amalgam of Scots, Gaelic, and English, plus Gothic, Sanskrit, Old Norse, seems to me a medium through which a great deal could be done to advance this world-wide experimentation and bring language abreast of modern psychological requirements.²⁴

MacDiarmid's poetic output appears eccentric even at a glance. The diverse range of poetic forms -- short lyrics, ballad-like pieces, long poems, endless poems of facts, Whitman-like prosaic verse (or verse prose?) -- is a reflection of his eclectic interests and experimenting mania. The lyrics included in *Sangschaw* (1925) and *Penny Wheep* (1926) not only reveal MacDiarmid's link with the Scottish ballad and song tradition, but they also foreshadow motifs and themes which he will further develop in his later poetry. The dualism and correlation of local and universal, physical and metaphysical spheres, is already there, as Boutelle points out in this synthetic interpretation of the meaning behind three of his early lyrics:

Scotland is becoming a symbol for mankind, with Lallans the link between Eden and paradise. Man may be a 'bonnie broukit bairn' but the 'datchie sesames' of the poet's vision remain. And the

²² See MacDiarmid's intertextual reference to Eliot in *On a Raised Beach*, in *Complete Poems*, I, pp. 422-433 (p. 427).

²³ 'MacDiarmid on MacDiarmid, p. 171.

²⁴ 'The Case for Synthetic Scots, in *At the Sign of the Thistle. A Collection of Essays*, pp. 178-187 (p. 187).

'chitterin' licht' illuminates earth and reveals what it means to be a man faced with glimpses of eternity.²⁵

The intertextual inserts respectively refer to 'The Bonnie Broukit Bairn' (*Sangschaw*), 'Gairmscoile' (*Penny Wheep*), and 'The Watergaw' (*Sangschaw*). By means of an imagist, economical language and the use of, to my mind, deliberately ambiguous metaphors, MacDiarmid succeeds in expressing simultaneously the precariousness of universal life and man's eternal preoccupation with the metaphysical dimension of time and space. Again one might use the still useful term 'antisyzygy' to describe MacDiarmid's marvellous representation of the finite and the infinite within the same poem.

In 'The Bonnie Broukit Bairn' MacDiarmid defends 'home' culture against the importation of foreign -- viz. English -- traditions by projecting Scotland as if through a magnifying glass, whereby the Scottish nation becomes identified with the earth -- the 'broukit bairn' -- and England with the glamorous planets, Mars, Venus and the moon. The grand, archaic style of the opening lines is soon replaced by a reductive idiom which half-comically, half-satirically, describes the planets' 'starry talk' as 'a wheen o' blethers' (utter nonsense)²⁶. The subject of 'The Watergaw' is more personal, and, despite the critics' controversial readings of the poem, it seems to me that 'ye' can be identified with the poet's father. Accordingly, the poem's pivotal image is that of the poet who looks retrospectively, and perhaps also introspectively, to find an answer to a self-tormenting mystery: the meaning of his father's 'last wild look'²⁷ before he died. The pervasive elusiveness of the whole poem does not allow the mystery to be solved, yet the final two lines open a new perspective and introduce an element of hope: 'An' I think that mebbe at last I ken/ What your look meant then'.

The speaker is a man apart, and his aloofness is hinted at when he describes himself 'ae weet forenicht i' the yow-trummle'; at a time when he should enjoy

²⁵ Boutelle, p. 79.

²⁶ 'The Bonnie Broukit Bairn', in *Complete Poems*, I, p. 17.

²⁷ 'The Watergaw', in *Complete Poems*, I, p. 17.

conviviality, he finds himself alone staring at that imperfect and flawed rainbow. He looks like an outsider, and his words may well suggest that he was a kind of family renegade: the 'foolish licht' of the watergaw is juxtaposed to that of his father's eyes, and seems to indicate the son's repudiation of what to his mind is the foolish belief in an after-life presumably professed by his parents. The poem presents a much more complex web of meanings, all strikingly compressed in the Doric language, with its characteristic 'tip of the iceberg' quality, whereby underneath the superficial sense a series of interlaced meanings are hidden. The adjective 'foolish', for example, might here be used in a Shakespearean, or even Freudian, sense, whereby the boundary between madness and sanity is fluid, to the extent that their respective meanings can be reversed -- thus subverting the classical notions of fixed order and value. This sense of the word 'fool' is expressed in MacDiarmid's early poem 'The Fool'.²⁸ If this were the case, the 'foolish licht' of the watergaw and of the mysterious figure's eyes would indicate a kind of superior knowledge, of almost supernatural perception. Nonetheless the father/ son relationship and the reflection about death and life triggered off by the watergaw remain the most impressive aspects. In short, the poem is about an epiphany, but the poet leaves it as enigmatic, and only suggests that the metaphysical is often encapsulated in the physical, or, in Blake's words, that 'everything that lives is Holy'. Likewise the meaning of the whole poem remains encapsulated in its mysterious language like that of the 'words cut oot in' the stane' in 'The Eemis Stane' (*Sangschaw*).²⁹

In 'Gairmscoile' MacDiarmid develops this notion further, and describes the potentialities of Scots as follows:

*It's soon', no' sense, that faddoms the herts o' men,
And by my sangs the rouch auld Scots I ken
E'en herts that ha'e nae Scots'll dirl richt thro'
As nocht else could -- for here's a language rings*

²⁸ 'The Fool', in *Annals of the Five Senses*, p 55.

²⁹ 'The Eemis Stane', in *Complete Poems*, I, p. 27,

*Wi' datchie sesames, and names for nameless things.*³⁰

MacDiarmid saw Scots as a repository of the true spirit of the race. By writing the second part of the last quoted line in English he seemed to have in mind a widening of his targeted audience to include non-Scots. He disconnects Saussure's signified and signifier to give priority to the latter, and invest the phonetic component of language with a psychological significance, seeing it as the receptacle of the Scots' collective unconscious. 'Gairmscoile' is a linguistic and semantic gallimaufry looking forward to the amplified vision of *A Drunk Man*.

MacDiarmid once described his aim in *A Drunk Man* thus: 'I was trying to project a series of metaphysical pictures of Scotland and the condition of the Scottish psyche'.³¹ Like his contemporary and rival Edwin Muir, MacDiarmid was convinced that historical and cultural events which led to momentous turning-points of Scottish history had had strong and peculiar effects on what he called the 'Scottish psyche' -- a generic phrase which nowadays perhaps sounds more chauvinistic than merely a denomination of national identity. Ultimately the poem is an invitation to the Scots to resuscitate the 'authentic' spirit of Scotland and restore its integrity by probing into their past history and literature, to rediscover the underlying mythic structure which provides the unifying force for their collective unconscious -- the 'missin' link', as MacDiarmid writes in *A Drunk Man* (p. 96). In previous poems such as 'Gairmscoile' and 'Sea Serpent' (*Penny Wheep*) MacDiarmid had already underlined the necessity for man to find again the link with the earth, and to come to terms with the collective unconscious, which in 'Gairmscoile' is symbolised by the 'skrymmorie monsters few daur look upon' (p. 72). In *A Drunk Man* he writes:

*Nae man can ken his hert until
The tide o' life uncovers it,
And horror-struck he sees a pit.*

³⁰ 'Gairmscoile', in *Complete Poems*, I, pp. 72-75 (p. 74).

³¹ 'Macdiarmid on MacDiarmid', pp. 172-173.

*Returnin' life can never fill! ...*³²

In *A Drunk Man* the equivalent image of the 'skrymmorie monsters' is that of the octopus and curling serpent which the thistle transforms into during one of its ever-changing metamorphoses. The protean nature of the thistle's symbolism also impinges upon the content and style of the whole poem. The themes and imagery perpetually, and sometimes abruptly, shift from the down-to-earth to the metaphysical, whereas the style and language record unexpected turns from colloquial pitch to a more sophisticated stream of consciousness, and a medley of jargons and borrowings from foreign languages. The protagonist's drunkenness provides the author with a literary device to contradict himself continuously without the need to give rational explanations. Heraclitus and his *pantha rei* haunt the poem from beginning to end; nothing stays the same, and the meaning itself keeps changing and challenging the reader with different potential interpretations. The poem celebrates flux and chaos against classical principles of stability and harmony, Nietzsche's Dionysian mode against the Aristotelian concept of wholeness as synonym of perfection. Yet in a post-Romantic fashion it also suggests that the flux is sporadically interrupted by different, yet recurrent, 'spots of time' in which man is accorded the ability to find ways of perceiving, if not understanding, the existential mystery.

Nevertheless, there is an essential difference between the 'spots of time' of the Romantics and MacDiarmid's moments in which the 'drunk man' has the privilege, though very fugacious, to achieve some kind of superior understanding. MacDiarmid's 'epiphany' is never fixed but characterised by a constant oscillation between positivity and negativity, between a fleeting moment of certainty and the intervention of new doubts which shatter that certainty. The protagonist's intemperance may superficially account for his continuous wavering between assertion and negation, but it is also a literary strategy hiding the existential truth that human knowledge is relative and subject to endless questioning and self-questioning. Whereas the romantic epiphany corresponds to the instant when the poet grasps

³² *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, p. 129.

universal truth, MacDiarmid's 'epiphany' is affected by the same relativism and changeability which acts on the whole poem.

In *The City of Dreadful Night* James Thomson expressed a similar principle of recurrence, which he translated into mathematical terms. But the city dwellers do not experience any epiphany; the preacher's talk and the statue of Melancholia help them merely to have confirmation of their despair. Yet in both writers there is an echo of Nietzsche's 'Eternal Recurrence', symbolised by the Great Wheel in MacDiarmid and by the rotating mill in Thomson, while Davidson saw it as the eternal ebb and flow, the eternal tide of Matter. Only in MacDiarmid though there seems to be the possibility of some form of epiphanic moment.

Hence the ubiquitous antisyzygical movement of the poem, the central dualism of endless flux and the temporary moments of understanding, when the drunk man continuously oscillates between sobriety and inebriety -- ultimately 'whaur extremes meet'. The entire poem is based on an oppositional system; almost every symbol is counterbalanced by an image which expresses the opposite reality. Among the many examples: the wasteland surrounding the protagonist contrasts with his quest to find means of stepping out of the desert to recover some form of Eden-like status; the image of the moon -- wily and enchanting -- is opposed to that of the sun, which in fact stands for a perpetual absence, eagerly longed for but never achieved; Jean, who personifies earthly and physical love, forms a pair with the 'silken lady', an allegory of the feminine principle, or Jung's 'anima'. Together they are an echo of the Kilmeny- witch of Fife paradigm, although Jean's physicality is imbued with a spiritual meaning, because, as MacDiarmid writes, 'Man's spreit is wi' his ingangs twined/ In ways that he can ne'er unwind' (p. 101).

MacDiarmid's eccentric style, with its extravagant blend of the low and the high, immediately emerges in the first section of the poem:³³

(To prove my saul is Scots I maun begin

³³ I call 'section' each of the 59 parts into which MacDiarmid divided the poem, and reproduced by Kenneth Buthlay from the American edition of *A Drunk Man* (1962 and 1967). See the already mentioned *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, ed. by Kenneth Buthlay.

Wi' what's still deemed Scots and the folk expect,
 And spire up syne by visible degrees
 To heichts whereo' the fules ha'e never recked.

But aince I get them there I'll whummle them
 And souse the cratur in the nether deeps,
 -- For it's nae choice, and ony man s'ud wish
 To dree the goat's weird tae as weel's the sheep's!) (p. 84)

In other words, MacDiarmid through the voice of the Drunk Man, wants to make clear that he will exploit the potentialities of reductive idiom and bathos in order to express the totality of human experience in both its physical and spiritual aspects. There is a clear affinity between this method and Byron's typical stylistic foibles. A Byronic tinge marks MacDiarmid's jeering comment on contemporary poetasters and poor imitators of Burns:

Puir Burns, wha's bouquet like a shot kail blows
 -- Will this rouch sicht no' gi'e the orchids pause?
 The Gairdens o' the Muses may be braw,
 But nane like oors can breenge and eat ana'!

And owre the kailyard-wa' Dunbar they've flung,
 And a' their countrymen that e'er ha'e sung
 For ither than ploomen's lugs or to enrichen
 Plots on Parnassus set apart for kitchen. (p. 106)

A good example of the combination of the physical and the metaphysical is the identification of the drunk man's self-knowledge with the moonlight, and of himself with the thistle pierced by that light:

The munelicht is my knowledge o' mysel',

Mysel' the thistle in the munelicht seen,
 And hauf my shape has fund itsel' in thee
 And hauf my knowledge in your piercin' een. (p. 112)

Later on in the poem the Drunk Man, addressing his own soul, stresses his contempt for any pre-conceived idea and rule, and his desire for spiritual freedom. These lines can be also taken as MacDiarmid's dramatic monologue and final plea:

Be like the thistle, O my soul,
 Heedless o' praise and quick to tak' affront,
 And growin' like a mockery o' a'
 Maist life can want or thole,
 And manifest forevermair
 Contempt o' ilka goal. (p. 136)

Like Davidson and Whitman, MacDiarmid's eccentricity also consists in a ravenous desire to plunge into all sorts of experience and quickly re-emerge from them, enriched with a wider knowledge and with an even more urgent need to search for new experiences. Thus the Drunk Man/ MacDiarmid says:

-- O I can spend a nicht
 In ony man's Delicht
 Or wi' ony wumman born
 -- But aye be aff the morn! (p. 140)

Since MacDiarmid saw the poet as a kind of secular God ('*Narodbogonoset*', p. 134), and a spiritual guide of his own country, he must necessarily embrace all experience and his soul must encompass all the oppositions afflicting his country, and attempt to 'mak' a unity o'these' (p. 145). Pretending to address a letter to Dostoevsky, the Drunk Man -- here a figure of the poet -- writes:

For a' that's Scottish is in me,
 As a' things Russian were in thee,
 And I in turn 'ud be an action
 To pit in a concrete abstraction
 My country's contrair qualities,
 And mak' a unity o' these
 Till my love owre its history dwells,
 As owretone to a peal o' bells. (p. 145)

The function of poetry, he further on says, is 'to bring to be/ At lang, lang last that unity ...' (p. 163).

This idea remained consistent throughout his poetry, and is taken to extremes in his later output, in which poetry becomes metapoetry, and the language of poetry his pivotal preoccupation. In *To Circumjack Cencrastus* (1930) poetry is compared to human consciousness struggling to be free, and the poet partly adopts the language of science which would later represent his main medium of expression:

The consciousness that maitter has entrapped
 In minerals, plants and beasts is strugglin' yet
 In men's minds only, seekin' to win free,
 As poets' ideas, in the fecht wi' words,
 Forced back upon themsel's and made mair clear,
 Owrecome a' thwarts whiles, miracles at last.³⁴

Apart from the singularity of his ideas on poetry and language, in this poem MacDiarmid's eccentricity especially emerges in his unorthodox religious vision, in particular, his reinterpretation of Christianity and proposal of an alternative -- yet in a sense still Christian -- perspective:

Christ saw you when he said that 'wha believe

In me shall dae like me -- *and greater things*.
 He is nae Christian that's fa'n short o' this,
 But och Christ tint you in the seein' tae.
 Come let us face the facts. He should ha' socht
 Faith in themsel's like his -- no' faith in him. (p. 182)

To have 'Faith in themsel' should be mankind's primary creed according to MacDiarmid. By admitting this, he asserts his own faith in man and his possibility of constant change and renewal despite the opposite action of time and death. He also asserts his belief in a strong individualism which Carlyle stressed before him. This particular faith in man and the influence of Carlyle links MacDiarmid with Davidson, who was as self-contradictory and as careless about his self-contradictoriness as MacDiarmid. Davidson's nihilistic vision did not stop him from conceiving man as the most perfect personification of matter, or as matter become conscious, thus claiming the fusion of spirit and matter. Yet it is especially in matters of language and style that the two poets can be seen aligned, and it is interesting that MacDiarmid acknowledges Davidson in one of his poems specifically about language: *In Memoriam of James Joyce* (1955). This poem, which Robert Crawford revealingly defines as a 'data-base-like poem',³⁵ may be seen as a *summa* of the ideas on poetry and language he had developed over the previous years, culminating in these revealing lines:

For this is the kind of poetry I want,
 Wandering from subject to subject
 And roaming back and forth in time
 Yet always as essentially controlled
 As a *saeta* or a flamenco song.³⁶

³⁴ *To Circumjack Cencrastus*, *Complete Poems*, I, pp. 181-292 (p. 187).

³⁵ R. Crawford, 'MacDiarmid and His Makers', p. 63.

³⁶ *In Memoriam of James Joyce*, *Complete Poems*, II, pp. 737-805 (p. 797).

ii. Epilogue: the 'strange procession' continues

MacDiarmid put Davidson among those writers who contributed to the renewal of poetic language

[...] with his angry cry
 'Our language is too worn, too much abused,
 Jaded and overspurred, wind-broken, lame, --
 The hackneyed roadster every bagman mounts'³⁷

And certainly Davidson introduced into poetry conventionally non-poetic words and images borrowed from other fields of knowledge, and his practice did influence MacDiarmid and subsequent Scottish poets. In *In Memoriam of James Joyce* MacDiarmid wrote: '[...] The authors I love best are they/ Who have lived, knocked about in the world' (p. 743), and Davidson was doubtless among them. The earlier poet's stylistic daring took the literary world aback, and received critical approval only several years after his death. Clearly, MacDiarmid saw Davidson as another outcast like himself; but what he especially admired was his predecessor's anti-mimetic and anti-sentimental vision of life transposed on to the poetic page with the cold precision and at the same time the intellectual depth of a scientist.

In the *New Saltire* MacDiarmid defined the significance of Davidson's writing as an attempt to alter 'the ingrained Scottish habit of cultivating the old patch', and added that

he wanted to bring poetic practice into line with scientific discovery
 to escape from the morass of stale poeticism and (in Pound's
 phrase) 'make it new', and in his best work he managed to free

³⁷ Ibid., p. 740.

himself from the millstone of accepted opinion which has hung [...] about the necks of modern Scottish writers.³⁸

Another aspect of Davidson's work particularly admired by MacDiarmid was his peculiar type of satire. In an essay on contemporary poetry MacDiarmid wrote:

The great instrument which can destroy the ubiquitous falsities of our times belongs to poetry and must be recovered and used by poetry. The future of poetry depends upon it. I refer to satire [...] Burns [...] came nearest to it of all the poets until recent years; then we had men like John Davidson and D. H. Lawrence [...] ³⁹

In both writers a satirical posture is often conveyed by the use of *dramatis personae* or the dramatic monologue, such as in MacDiarmid's 'Wheesht, Wheesht', 'The Currant Bush', 'The Widower', 'Scunner', and many other poems which are technically and thematically very close to Davidson's poetry of the underdog.

In both poets there is a balanced combination of realistic observation and elaborate speculation, between everyday concerns and more sophisticated thinking and imagery -- as in Davidson's 'The Isle of Dogs' and MacDiarmid's Salonika poems. Both wrote 'poetry of facts' in the later phase of their career, and both described themselves in terms of *Übermenschen* whose soul encompasses the whole universe:

So I have gathered unto myself
All the loose ends of Scotland,
And by naming them and accepting them,
Loving them and identifying myself with them,

³⁸ 'The Wrong Turning in Scottish Poetry. Review of *John Davidson. A Selection of His Poems*, edited by Maurice Lindsay', *New Saltire*, 1 (1961), 69-72 (pp. 71-72).

³⁹ 'Problems of Poetry Today', in *At the Sign of the Thistle*, pp. 89-123 (pp. 113-114).

Attempt to express the whole.⁴⁰

Nonetheless, these lines are tinged with a strong national feeling which is absent or perhaps suppressed in Davidson. But both writers saw the poet in Carlylean terms as endowed with the ability to perceive what common men cannot perceive, and they also believed that this 'abnormal' faculty made the poet wayward, eccentric and isolated from society. In 'The War with England' MacDiarmid wrote:

I was better with the sounds of the sea
 Than with the voices of men
 And in desolate and desert places
 I found myself again.⁴¹

These lines are a striking echo of Davidson's 'man forbid' or other outcast figures of his poetry. They also describe the task of the artist in similar terms, as the powerful -- and the fittest -- individual who must use his prophetic gift to point the way to new paths of knowledge. In *A Drunk Man* MacDiarmid says that '*a Scottish poet maun assume/ The burden o' his people's doom/ And dee to brak' their livin' tomb*' (p. 165). The poet is for MacDiarmid a Christ-like figure who has to cut himself loose from social conventions in order to achieve self-realisation and send a message to mankind. In 'The War with England' MacDiarmid writes:

I had to lie on the hills and watch
 The founts that to keep their tryst
 Had found their way through the wards of the rock
 Slower than the second coming of Christ
 To know how my task was priced. (p. 454)

⁴⁰ 'Scotland', *Complete Poems*, I, p. 652.

⁴¹ 'From "The War with England"', in *Complete Poems*, I, p. 454.

The Nietzschean idea that the poet is a kind of superman who 'returns to the source' of life (p. 454) -- identified by MacDiarmid with the 'sounds of the sea' and the 'desolate and desert places' -- is similar both to Davidson's notion of the poet's return to nature in order to investigate the material condition of life and to Thomson's vision of the poet as a wanderer in the desert who confronts the dreadful night of life, and leaves to mankind a lesson of stoic endurance.

Indeed MacDiarmid's indebtedness to Thomson was bigger than he actually thought. He refers to the author of *The City of Dreadful Night* in one of his essays:

[...] the main problem I faced was the appalling nostalgia that had afflicted Scottish writers and the Scottish reading public since the death of Burns [...] Various efforts to break through the vicious circle were made by poets and social realists like John Davidson and James Thomson of 'The City of dreadful night' but the difficulty was exemplified by the fact that they either committed suicide, died in an asylum, or died destitute in the streets of London.⁴²

As Roderick Watson points out, Thomson, Davidson and MacDiarmid belong to what he defines as the 'Metaphysical school of poetry'.⁴³ Each of them was preoccupied with finding an alternative faith in place of Christian orthodoxy: Thomson found it in an agnostic belief in human stoicism; Davidson found it in the assertion of will and universal matter; MacDiarmid in a sense appropriated both of these ideas, since he rested his vision on scientific concepts, but he made it more humane by replacing Davidson's absolute and eternal matter with the acceptance of the endless process and transformation of universal life.

In *On a Raised Beach* his themes and style are continuously reminiscent of both Davidson's scientific position and language, and of Thomson's metaphysical vision. As Thomson refers to the 'aeons of slow pain',⁴⁴ MacDiarmid's notion of time

⁴² 'MacDiarmid on MacDiarmid', p. 170.

⁴³ Roderick Watson, *History of Scottish Literature*, p. 296.

⁴⁴ *The City of Dreadful Night*, XIII. 30.

in *On a Raised Beach* is Bergson-like and modernist, since he sees eternity as encapsulated in the stone -- symbol of endless geological process and, simultaneously, of endurance. But his vision is also Blakean; the stone is like the grain of sand encompassing universal life. So MacDiarmid can write: 'Nothing has stirred/ Since I lay down this morning an eternity ago/ But one bird' or that the stones have a 'divine rhythm, wholly at one/ With the earth, riding the Heavens with it'.⁴⁵ These stones -- 'cold, undistracted, eternal and sublime' (p. 427)-- symbolise MacDiarmid's vision of universal *concoro oppositorum*, a motley and yet unified reality:

Ratchel, striae, relationships of tesserae,
Innumerable shades of grey,
Innumerable shapes,
And beneath them all a stupendous unity (p. 426)

They are also an image of the poet 'prepared with everything else to share/ Sunshine and darkness and wind and rain/ And life and death bare as these rocks though it be' and ready to 'reconcile' himself 'to the stones' (p. 428), or to the source and essence of life -- the 'Alpha and Omega, the Omnific Word' (p. 429)-- that the stones represent.

MacDiarmid achieved this reconciliation with the past and with his own and his nation's subconscious more successfully than Thomson and Davidson. His statement in *On a Raised Beach* 'I am enamoured of the desert at last' (p. 431) testifies to the resolute acceptance of his status of 'ex-centric' as the only status which allows him to understand or at least perceive the truth of existence. What he meant to convey in *On a Raised Beach* is that, by accepting this condition, man does not escape from life but conversely acquires 'the power/ To exercise the loneliness, the independence, of stones' (p. 431). Thomson and Davidson paved the way towards this superior, almost superhuman, ability to grasp the eternal in the local, the infinite in the finite, and endure the isolation deriving from such a faculty, but their attempts had a tragic outcome. On the other hand, although it may appear as a more local

⁴⁵ *On a Raised Beach*, pp. 423, 425.

contribution to Scottish poetry, Geddes's eccentric writing did not cause a self-destructive sense of alienation from contemporary society. Unfortunately MacDiarmid seems not to have known his work, and failed to recognise his likeness to the Dundee poet's eccentric style and radical ideas.

The present study is an attempt to throw light on such unacknowledged literary links, and show that MacDiarmid's ideological concept of 'eccentricity' and its representation on various poetic levels -- linguistic, stylistic, and semantic -- found an early expression in Hogg and some poets of the Victorian period. In particular the late nineteenth-century poets deserve a new critical reassessment not only because they anticipated later poetic developments, but also because their individual achievements are in themselves meritorious. This study could go on to investigate the presence or absence of eccentric traits in modern Scottish poets, and point out the linguistic and ideological eccentricities of poets such as Robert Garioch, William Soutar, Douglas Young, Sydney Goodsir Smith and Edwin Morgan, or the religious and geographical eccentricities of George Mackay Brown, Iain Crichton Smith, and Kenneth White or the all-embracing whimsicalities of Robert Crawford's and Tom Leonard's poetry. My view is that most of the post-Scottish Literary Renaissance poets are not so much concerned with a unified national identity as with the recognition of individual and social differences, and of the existence of different kinds of Scottishness within Scotland with which they have come to terms. Thus, to quote Schoene,

Racist critical concepts like that of a 'Caledonian antisyzygy', which regards the Scottish psyche as profoundly harmed by its historical experience to the extent that it has become irrevocably schizophrenic, do not any longer apply.⁴⁶

Even if many modern Scottish poets reveal various degrees of eccentricity, they do not any longer speak about them, because they have assimilated and come to terms

⁴⁶ Berthold Schoene, 'A Passage to Scotland: Scottish Literature and the British Postcolonial Condition', *Scotlands*, 2.1 (1995), 107-122 (p. 114).

with their otherness, and because we live in a world where notions such as 'eccentricity' and 'otherness' are certainly less threatening than they used to be. As Morgan admitted, 'an awareness of the continuously shifting potentialities and admixtures of a varied and unsettled language situation can stimulate the art of writing in individual cases'.⁴⁷

From Hogg to MacDiarmid several poets wrote in such a situation; all of them were aware of it yet, but few of them realised its 'shifting potentialities'. Hogg, Smith, Davidson and Thomson caught only glimpses of it; Geddes was aware of them and exploited them; MacDiarmid attempted to oppose that 'unsettled language situation' but eventually came to a standstill, and opted for an acceptance of the diversity and motleyess rather than the unification of Scottish culture. As Schoene observes,

the aim of contemporary Scottish literature is to emphasise individuality and intracommunal difference rather than to construct dubious, all-in-one myths of a nationalist quality [...] contemporary Scottish authors have started to look at Scotland as a country, nation and society of great diversity and potential, not one-sidedly as a shut up victim of imperial anglicisation.⁴⁸

In this perspective even Anglicisation no longer represents a threat but becomes incorporated in a society where everything is called into question, including its own supposed 'centre', and where it may paradoxically happen that 'the eccentric [...] becomes the typical'.⁴⁹ Eccentricity, as it were, rules.

⁴⁷ Edwin Morgan, *Crossing the Border* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1990), p. 14.

⁴⁸ Schoene, p. 116.

⁴⁹ MacDiarmid, *Scottish Eccentrics*, p. 286.

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